

AESTHETIC & SEXUALITY

A Literary History of Sadomasochism



ROMANA BYRNE

B L O O M S B U R Y

Aesthetic Sexuality

Aesthetic Sexuality: A Literary History of Sadomasochism

Romana Byrne

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Author's note

All quoted italics in this book belong to the original text. The use of square brackets around ellipses indicates my own omission of words within a quote. The absence of square brackets reflects the quoted author's own use of ellipses. All translations from French to English are my own, unless specified otherwise.

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Introduction

“Scientia sexualis *contre* ars erotica, *sans doute*.”¹

To best understand the concept of aesthetic sexuality, let us first revisit one of the most well known and important expositions in sexuality studies. In refuting the hypothesis that sex has been repressed since the seventeenth century, the first volume of Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* outlines how the late nineteenth century’s *scientia sexualis*—a pervasive network of institutional discourses and practices founded upon scientific positivism and techniques of confession in the domains of pedagogy, family relations, law, medicine, and psychiatry—consolidated the characteristics of sexuality in the West.² Sexuality was constructed as a natural, inborn, and permanent function of the body subject to acquired or congenital pathologies of a psychological and physiological nature, “a natural order of disorder” (44). “Sexuality” signified a truth to be discovered and analyzed (69), a construction that transformed sexual acts once performable by anyone into indicators of a certain type of person, producing a “new specification of individuals” (42–3). Sexual acts and desires became involuntary manifestations of a particular biological or psychological cause. Yet the science of sexuality, Foucault stipulates, is only one form of the “two great procedures for producing the truth of sex” (57). To contrast with the *scientia sexualis*, Foucault introduces the *ars erotica*, in which sexual pleasure is not considered in terms of forbidden or permitted experience and knowledge but is valued and assessed according to its quality and intensity; the erotic art is learnt through practice and experience, developed under conscious, masterful will (62). Crucially, according to Foucault, the West, equipped with its *scientia sexualis*, “possesses no *ars erotica*”; he argues that the latter belongs to Eastern cultures, and cites “China, Japan, India, Rome, the Arabo-Moslem societies” as possessors of an *ars erotica*, referring to pre-modern Italy (57–8). Foucault qualifies this statement by adding that the “*ars erotica* did not disappear

¹ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité 1, La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 94; “*scientia sexualis* versus *ars erotica*, no doubt.”

² Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998), 68.

altogether from Western civilization" (70), although he does not attempt to detail how and in what form it existed here, with one exception: that a kind of "erotic art" may be observed in the fixation, within the *scientia sexualis*, of discovering and exposing the truth, of the production of truth (70–1). This, to select one of Foucault's two suggested conclusions, cannot be classified as a true *ars erotica*: "these pleasures are only the by-products of a sexual science, a bonus that compensates for its many stresses and strains" (71–2). Thus, the question of how a veritable *ars erotica* may have existed in the modern West remains, in this text, unaddressed by Foucault: it is the product of the *scientia sexualis*, which may be termed for our purposes "essentialized sexuality," that Foucault argues has almost exclusively occupied Western culture since the nineteenth century.

The first volume of Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* has been profoundly influential in subsequent constructivist histories, significantly informing the field of sexuality studies and defining the terms and trajectory of the history of sexuality as an academic discipline. Beyond charges of orientalism, writers within this discipline have rarely questioned Foucault's *ars erotica/scientia sexualis* dichotomy, and, following Foucault, have focused on deconstructing the emergence and consolidation of essentialized sexuality.³ With the exception of a handful of scholars who have identified very limited variations of an *ars erotica* in modern culture, the possibility that this phenomenon has existed within the West to any considerable degree has been overlooked.⁴ This book aims to address this elision by examining a sadomasochistic

³ Leon Antonio Rocha has produced the most sustained problematization of this dichotomy in richly complicating Foucault's conception of the Chinese *ars erotica*. "Scientia Sexualis Versus Ars Erotica: Foucault, Van Gulik, Needham," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 42 (2011): 334–40.

⁴ Scholars who observe abbreviated instances of a contemporary *ars erotica*, or who advocate its introduction, include: Richard Shusterman, "Aesthetic Experience: From Analysis to Eros," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 64, no. 2 (2006): 225; Anthony Pryce, "Some People Live out Their Own Snuff Movie: Knowledge, Safer Sex and Managing Desire in the City," *Sexuality & Relationships* 10, no. 1 (2001): 15–33; Peter Laipson, "'Kiss Without Shame, for She Desires It': Sexual Foreplay in American Marital Advice Literature, 1900–1925," *Journal of Social History* 29, no. 3 (1996): 507–25; Gerald Doherty, "Ars Erotica or Scientia Sexualis?: Narrative Vicissitudes in D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*," *Journal of Narrative Technique* 26 (1996): 137–57; Peter Cryle, *Geometry in the Boudoir: Configurations of French Erotic Narrative* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008). The most convincing and elaborate argument regarding the existence of an *ars erotica* in the West is that of Gaëtan Brulotte, whose article is not available in English. "L'ars erotica de l'Occident," *Sites: the Journal of Twentieth-Century/Contemporary French Studies* 6, no. 1 (2002): 133–54. Brulotte evidences his argument by compiling an extensive list of French literary works from the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries to show "le rôle que la littérature a pu jouer en Occident dans la formation et la transmission de l'ars erotica" (18) ["the role that literature has played in the West in the formation and transmission of the *ars erotica*"]. Brulotte's survey is comprehensive in the number and range of French titles it traverses but its analysis often lacks depth and detail, at times simply reeling off a list of titles without explaining how they exemplify an *ars erotica*. Furthermore, the main and often sole principle of the *ars erotica* to which Brulotte's archive of texts testify is the pedagogic path of pleasure; Brulotte concludes that "la vérité sexuelle" ["the sexual truth"] in these texts is not principally produced within "le discours de l'aveu, mais dans celui de l'enseignement" (19) ["the discourse of confession, but in that of pedagogy"]. The *ars erotica*, in Foucault's conception, encompasses several other key principles, such as its links with practices of self-creation, for example, whose presence in contemporary Western culture I demonstrate in this book, through my broader category of aesthetic sexuality.

form of *ars erotica* that has existed in modern Western culture alongside essentialized notions of sexuality since the eighteenth century.

Although Foucault maintains—at least within the *History of Sexuality* series—that an *ars erotica* never truly existed in the modern West, he does, later, write about an aesthetics of sex that preceded the *scientia sexualis* and that could possibly replace it. For Foucault, these sexual aesthetics were intimately linked with a system of self-fashioning in the “art of existence” or “technique of life” that was practiced by free Greek men in Antiquity.⁵ In the Greek “aesthetics of existence,” which Foucault defines against the modern “hermeneutics of desire,” men sought to “make their life into an *œuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria.”⁶ Governing one’s life under the principle of beauty was a moral imperative; ethics were practiced at the surface level of aesthetics, the moral use of moderation and restraint a source of beauty. Furthermore, appearance and conduct were not expressions of a deeper drive or truth but displays of one’s chosen style of existence; one’s *ēthos* was “evident in his clothing, appearance, gait [. . . which] was the concrete form of freedom.”⁷ Within this regime of beauty and morality, of choice and self-fashioning, sexual practice played a crucial role, being one of the primary ways in which men could construct a life of ethical and sensual splendor, with “ontological structures and [. . .] visibly beautiful shape.”⁸

For Foucault, the arts of existence precede rather than encompass any form of what he conceives of as sexuality: he argues that these aesthetic regimes disintegrated as early Christianity “diverted the practices of self towards the hermeneutics of self and the deciphering of oneself as a subject of desire,” a procedure that established the foundations of essentialized sexuality.⁹ This distinction is reinforced by Halperin, who argues that Ancient Greek men, in treating sexual object-choice as a matter of taste and lifestyle, do not display “a different ‘sexuality’” but rather prove that “they exhibited no ‘sexuality’ at all.”¹⁰ Advocating “practices of freedom over processes of liberation,” and

⁵ Michel Foucault, “The Concern for Truth,” in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Routledge, 1988), 259. In 1983, Foucault, criticizing the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, stated that “the Greeks and Romans did not have any *ars erotica* to be compared with the Chinese *ars erotica* (or at least it was not something very important in their culture). They had a *techné tou biou* [art of life] in which the economy of pleasure played a very large role.” Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,” in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed., eds. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Harvey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 234. Thus, the sexual aesthetics of Ancient Greece should not be considered synonymous with the *ars erotica*, or at least with how Foucault understood the *ars erotica* to operate in other cultures. Yet Foucault certainly grants the Ancient Greek aesthetics of existence a strong affinity with the *ars erotica*, particularly in its opposition to the *scientia sexualis* and modern sexuality.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality Volume 2*, trans. Robert Hurley (Penguin, 1984), 89, 10–11.

⁷ Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press, 1997), 286.

⁸ Foucault, *Use of Pleasure*, 89.

⁹ Foucault, “Concern for Truth,” 260.

¹⁰ David Halperin, “Historicizing the Subject of Desire,” in *Discourses of Sexuality: From Aristotle to AIDS*, ed. Domna C. Stanton (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 258–9.

directly linking “sexual freedom” with the creation of “works of art,” Foucault conceived of sexual lifestyle as a replacement for sexuality.¹¹ In a late interview, he suggests that the gay liberation movement could benefit from invoking sexual aesthetics rather than adhering to a science of sexuality and the notion of “a secret side of our desire.”¹² In this interview, Foucault also identifies a burgeoning form of sexual aesthetics in gay male sadomasochism subcultures, although his research into this potential form of a contemporary *ars erotica* was arrested by his death in 1984. This book takes up this line of inquiry by demonstrating that an *ars erotica* is encompassed in a form of sexuality—which I term “aesthetic sexuality”—that has existed in Western culture since at least the eighteenth century.

Aesthetic sexuality

Aesthetic sexuality encompasses, but is not synonymous with, Foucault’s conception of the *ars erotica* as this is defined in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. These two notions intersect at several points: firstly, they are both concerned with forms of sexual practice as a mode of freedom; secondly, just as the *ars erotica* centers upon pedagogy and cultivation, so too is “technique and mastery” essential to aesthetic sexuality;¹³ finally, aesthetic sexuality, like the *ars erotica*, is concerned with intensifying pleasure to the point of shattering bliss.¹⁴ Yet although the intensification of pleasure is important in aesthetic sexuality, it is not the crux of this concept as it is of the *ars erotica*. In aesthetic sexuality, pleasure is valued “in relation to itself,” as it is within the *ars erotica*, but, in contrast, it is not stripped of all use-value: in aesthetic sexuality, pleasure has utility in its capacity to serve as a form of social communication and self-creation.¹⁵

Aesthetic sexuality indicates a form of sexuality constructed as having aesthetic value, a quality that marks this experience as a form of art. Aesthetic value is apparent in the way in which sexuality is enacted, its composition, characteristics, style, or technique, and the pleasure this produces. Value and meaning are located within the experiences of sexual practice and pleasure rather than in what may be thought to be their underlying cause; sexuality’s *raison d’être* is tied to its aesthetic value, at surface level rather than beneath it. Aesthetic sexuality is cultivated through choice, demonstrating a deliberate strategy of self-creation as well as a mode of social communication, and therefore can be chosen and cultivated by potentially any individual on the basis of its intended aesthetic value. Aesthetic sexuality, it might be said, is flaunted by the Baudelairean dandy, who, in Foucault’s description, “makes of his body, his behavior, his feelings and passions, his very existence, a work of art,” who does

¹¹ Foucault, “Concern of the Self,” 283; Foucault, “Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press, 1997), 163.

¹² Foucault, “Politics of Identity,” 163.

¹³ Foucault, *Will to Knowledge*, 61, 62.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 57–8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

not endeavor to “discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth [...] but] tries to invent himself.”¹⁶ In making this assertion, I do not confuse constructivism with choice, as both Butler and Sedgwick warn against,¹⁷ but suggest that the autonomous and self-styling aesthetic sexual subject is constituted as such by particular historical and ideological conditions. In this book, I illustrate what these conditions are and how they constitute aesthetic sexual subjects.

In examining how identity is constituted through aesthetic sexuality, I demonstrate that sexual identity may remain on the aesthetic plane of conscious artificiality, malleability, and choice, a possibility that Butler, in arguing against the “figure of a choosing subject” in her well known work on gender identity, emphatically denies.¹⁸ It is because the issues of subjectivity and identity are so important to the aesthetic practices and experiences I discuss in this book that, rather than consider an “aesthetics of sex,” I retain the term “sexuality.” The forms of identity implicated in aesthetic sexuality are, of course, drastically different from those invested within essentialized forms of sexuality. Indeed, the very phrase “aesthetic sexuality” is paradoxical, as the term “sexuality” typically denotes the essentialized product of the nineteenth century’s *scientia sexualis*, against which my model is defined. Therefore, it is worth reiterating that “aesthetic sexuality” signifies a form of sexuality that opposes the essentialized construction historicized in the work of Foucault and many others; in exploring this concept, it is my aim to expand the ontological possibilities signified by the category “sexuality.”

Because my analysis of aesthetic sexuality turns away from the tendency within psychoanalysis to trace sexual etiology—I am concerned with how meaning is constructed through sexual practice rather than seeking it in the practice’s underlying “cause”—this book primarily concerns sexual pleasure rather than desire. Baudrillard notes that the latter is associated with a “*naturalized* sexual imperative,” an inner drive that requires realization.¹⁹ This notion is echoed by Foucault, who invites a movement away from a hermeneutic analysis of sexuality when he declares that “for centuries people generally, as well as doctors, psychiatrists, and even liberation movements, have always spoken about desire, and never about pleasure. ‘We have to liberate our desire,’ they say. *No!* we have to create new pleasure.”²⁰ I demonstrate throughout this book how pleasure is produced—rather than how desire is liberated—via aesthetic sexuality.

Sadomasochism

Aesthetic sexuality is examined throughout this book through the example of sadomasochism, which is widely, although by no means consistently, understood today

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press, 1997), 312.

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 94; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 41.

¹⁸ Butler, *Bodies*, x.

¹⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (London: Macmillan Education), 24.

²⁰ Foucault, “Politics of Identity,” 167.

as the eroticized exchange principally of power and often also of pain. As we shall see, historical variations of what we would now list under this name often stray very far away indeed from this contemporary conceptualization. Sadomasochism is approached in this book as a sexual practice, subjective identification, and mode of aesthetic representation. My use of the conjoined term “sadomasochism,” rather than the separate terms “sadism” and “masochism,” is deliberate. The latter names were popularized by psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing in an 1890 edition of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, a work first published in 1886. “Sadism” was taken from the name of the Marquis de Sade, of course, and “masochism” from that of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, although these terms were already in limited use before they were redefined to signify psychopathologies in Krafft-Ebing’s work.²¹ The conjoined term is commonly attributed to Freud, although Krafft-Ebing had, before Freud, referred to a “sadistic-masochistic element,” suggesting that he conceded a complementarity between what he understood to be distinct pathologies.²² Sadism and masochism are also considered to be fundamentally distinct by Deleuze, whose evidence partly concerns their having disparate psychoanalytic etiologies as well as formal values.²³ Deleuze’s bifurcation of sadism and masochism emerges from his desire for “a genuine symptomatology,” a framework that opposes the aims of this book, despite Deleuze’s ambitious generalization that “symptomatology is always [...] a question of art.”²⁴ It is not the bifurcated terms but “sadomasochism” that concerns this book because, as I shall demonstrate in each chapter, against Deleuze, practices and pleasures that might otherwise be associated with either sadism or masochism are united by a particular aesthetic value, an important defining quality, specific to particular cultural-historical moments. These defining qualities, it will become clear, extend far beyond questions of how and why dominance and submission, or practices of pain, are assigned between participants.

Discussing sadomasochism as a form of aesthetic sexuality offers an original analysis of this sexual practice and identification. It should be clear that this book is not organized around the imperatives of identity politics and social justice, concerns that,

²¹ Krafft-Ebing implies that he is the author of the term “masochism” when he states that he feels “justified in calling this sexual anomaly ‘Masochism,’ because the author *Sacher-Masoch* frequently made this perversion.” *Psychopathia Sexualis, with Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Forensic Study*, 12th ed., trans. Franklin S. Klaf (New York: Stein and Day, 1978), 87. However, it was actually an “anonymous correspondent from Berlin,” one of Krafft-Ebing’s informants, who proposed this term to the psychiatrist, as Harry Oosterhuis notes in *Stepchildren of Nature: Krafft-Ebing, Psychiatry, and the Making of Sexual Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 174–5. This raises the question of a subcultural use of the term “masochism” before Krafft-Ebing’s own application. Before the publication of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, the term “sadism” was used in literary criticism from the 1850s in reference to the work of Flaubert and Baudelaire, and, in the 1880s, to the work of the Marquis de Sade. Oosterhuis, *Stepchildren*, 205. Thus, Krafft-Ebing did not invent this term, but he did redefine it as a psychopathological, rather than literary, category.

²² Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 166.

²³ Gilles Deleuze, “Coldness and Cruelty,” in *Masochism*, trans. Jean McNeil (Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 1991), 34.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 40, 14.

before and after the rise of queer theory, have colonized contemporary scholarship on all forms of “marginal” sexualities. It goes without saying that such concerns are important, but they have left little room for conceptualizing the significance of many sexual practices beyond an axis of normativity and deviance, with a goal, explicit or implicit, of preferred forms of social legibility. In discussing sadomasochism as an exemplar of aesthetic sexuality—in using it to map the existence of a particular sexual ontology—my book turns away from this trend.

Sadomasochism provides an ideal demonstration of aesthetic sexuality for several reasons. Although the practice has been subject to a substantial history of etiological diagnosis, the discourses that constitute sadomasochism’s cultural history also accentuate principles of aesthetic sexuality. Several critics have noted the way in which sadomasochism resists an essentialized ontology of sexuality, and McClintock encapsulates this line of thought succinctly when she states that sadomasochism, as a “theatrical exercise [...] is self-consciously against nature, not in the sense that it violates natural law, but in the sense that it denies the existence of natural law in the first place.”²⁵ Contemporary discourses in particular emphasize choice, intentionality, and creation, a point that will focus later chapters in this book. Importantly, sadomasochism practiced amongst gay men focuses Foucault’s account of a burgeoning form of *ars erotica* in contemporary Western culture (Foucault presumably mentioned this specific group of practitioners because of his personal familiarity with it). Foucault suggests that the prevalence of sadomasochistic practice in contemporary society results from the ease with which sex can be obtained. In previous eras, games of power, “interest and curiosity [...] cunning and manipulation” structured extended courtship processes directed towards sex and other goals.²⁶ Today, Foucault proposes, in a culture where obtaining sex no longer presents the challenge it once did, these strategies are incorporated within the sex act in order to intensify pleasure and curb boredom.²⁷ Foucault defines contemporary sadomasochism against essentialism, arguing that the practice is not related to “the disclosure or the uncovering of S&M tendencies deep within our unconscious” but signifies “the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure” enabled by shifting attention from the genitals to the entire body, a process that he terms the “desexualization of pleasure.”²⁸ The intensification of pleasure, the central principle of the *ars erotica*, is, for Foucault, the primary aim of sadomasochism. In declaring sadomasochism to hold the most potential for reconstructing a contemporary *ars erotica*, Foucault illuminates how this practice also provides a fitting focus for an examination of aesthetic sexuality.

²⁵ Anne McClintock, “Maid to Order: Commercial Fetishism and Gender Power,” *Social Text* 37 (1993): 90–1.

²⁶ Foucault, “Politics of Identity,” 298.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Foucault, “Sexual Choice, Sexual Act: Foucault and Homosexuality,” in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1988), 165.

Aesthetic sexualities

Different facets of aesthetic sexuality may be observed in sexual practices besides sadomasochism. For example, gay male cultures, sadomasochistic or not, are also posited by Foucault as sites for the reinvention of sexual aesthetics: he suggests that “one could perhaps say there is a ‘gay style’ or at least there is an ongoing attempt to recreate a certain style of existence, a form of existence or art of living, which might be called ‘gay.’”²⁹ The notion of choice, which is central to aesthetic sexuality, is pertinent to sexualities invested with political ends, one example being lesbian feminism. Jeffreys suggests that lesbian feminism opposes “the sexological construction [...] that lesbianism was a congenital anomaly [...] psychologically determined” and reframes this orientation as “a revolutionary [*sic*] political choice” that aims to destabilize patriarchal power dynamics. According to Jeffreys, opposition to biological essentialism and the assertion of choice are not simply tied to a political agenda but can be observed in the personal experiences of lesbians in the 1970s.³⁰ Jeffreys recalls the adoption of lesbianism by women “who had not knowingly considered lesbianism as a possibility,” who had simply “never thought of being attracted to women.”³¹ Jeffreys’ commentary suggests that the experiences of desiring, practicing, and taking pleasure in lesbian sex simply require knowledge of this option, that pleasure and desire will manifest with the decision to act. It must be noted, however, that in Jeffreys’ conception of lesbianism, the element of choice functions slightly differently than in my notion of aesthetic sexuality. In aesthetic sexuality, the motive to choose a particular sexual practice is specifically tied to the practice’s aesthetic value, whether this is its beautiful form or the pleasure it produces. Furthermore, in aesthetic sexuality, it is the aesthetic value of the practice that creates political meaning, if this is apparent, while in Jeffreys’ conception, it is choice *per se*—the choice to engage in lesbian rather than in heterosexual practices—that has political significance.

Jeffreys’ notion of lesbianism as a political choice can also be found in Hoagland’s *Lesbian Ethics*, and it has been argued that female bisexuality should also be conceived within similar terms.³² This attempt to posit bisexuality as a political tool alongside lesbianism departs from the tendency, in particular feminist and subcultural discourses, to perceive a tension between the social significance of the two orientations.³³ Such perceived friction is demonstrated by Wilkinson’s argument that bisexuality, as a chic form of “sexual tourism,” depoliticizes sex and opposes radical feminism.³⁴ Wilkinson argues that sex between women is promoted to heterosexual women on the basis that

²⁹ Ibid., 292.

³⁰ Sheila Jeffreys, *The Lesbian Heresy: A Feminist Perspective on the Lesbian Sexual Revolution* (North Melbourne: Spinifex, 1993), 62.

³¹ Ibid., 63, 92.

³² Sarah Lucia Hoagland, *Lesbian Ethics: Toward New Value* (Palo Alto: Institute of Lesbian Studies, 1988); Elisabeth D. Däumer, “Queer Ethics: Or, the Challenge of Bisexuality to Lesbian Ethics,” *Hypatia* 7, no. 4 (1992): 101.

³³ Sheila Jeffreys, “Bisexual Politics: A Superior Form of Feminism,” *Women’s Studies International Forum*, no. 22 (1999): 273–85.

³⁴ Sue Wilkinson, “Bisexuality ‘A La Mode,’” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 19, no. 3 (1996): 294.

it is more satisfying than female-male sex, permitting women to say “goodbye phallus and sandpaper kisses, hello soft skin and sensational sex.”³⁵ In this conception, female-female sex is promoted on the basis of its tactile aesthetics and the degree of pleasure it offers rather than an imperative to respond to a deep-seated desire. Despite noting that “fashionable” bisexuality is constructed by discourses premised upon “liberal-humanistic notions of ‘self-fulfillment,’ ‘choice,’ and ‘freedom,’” Wilkinson argues, unconvincingly, that such a representation of bisexuality reinforces biological essentialism.³⁶ On the contrary, Wilkinson’s condemnatory account of bisexual chic, which highlights how the element of choice is tied to a concern for pleasure and the qualities of sexual practice, actually illuminates its intersection with aesthetic sexuality. “Lesbian chic,” which, in 2012, was declared by major fashion websites to be more “in” than ever, may be considered in similar terms.³⁷ While various practices and identifications display facets of aesthetic sexuality and invite further research in this respect, as I have outlined, in this book I examine aesthetic sexuality through the example of sadomasochism, whose cultural history since the eighteenth century provides a thorough illustration of different elements of this phenomenon.

The question of choice

Aesthetic sadomasochism, of course, exists alongside essentializing and pathologizing models within modern culture; the latter forms have certainly not waned in pertinence since their nineteenth-century invention. In *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Krafft-Ebing proposes that the congenital and acquired psychopathologies of sadism and masochism are products of hereditary taint and mental degeneration, manifesting as “impulsions” that cannot be mastered by will.³⁸ *Psychopathia Sexualis* was not the first text to consider sadism and masochism in a medical context. Medical and anthropological treatises were written on flagellation in the fifteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries in Italy, Germany, and France, although these did not participate in a modern form of pathologizing; more closely approaching Krafft-Ebing’s own medical framework, American neurologists and physicians had published on the topic—albeit without Krafft-Ebing’s labels—several years before the first edition of *Psychopathia Sexualis* appeared. Yet Krafft-Ebing’s tome was instrumental in tying these desires to the idea of psychopathology, and the celebrated reception of the work instigated ongoing research by sexologists and physicians such as Havelock Ellis, Albert Eulenberg, and Albert von Schrenck-Notzing; the latter introduced the term “algolagnia,” meaning love of pain. In the early twentieth century, sexology’s expression of hereditary degeneration was claimed by psychoanalysis as an expression of psychic

³⁵ O’Sullivan quoted in Wilkinson, “Bisexuality,” 298.

³⁶ Wilkinson, “Bisexuality,” 294, 299.

³⁷ Maya Singer, “Is Lesbian Chic Here to Stay?” *Style.com*, Condé Nast; http://www.style.com/trendshopping/stylenotes/083012_Spring_2013_Preview/.

³⁸ Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 138, 35, 18.

neurosis, a notion popularized by Freud. In the 1920s and 1930s, psychoanalysts Helene Deutsch, Marie Bonaparte, and Karen Horney, informed by Freud, reinforced and expanded links with gendered psychology and cultural roles, while Wilhelm Stekel traced sadism and masochism to childhood psychosexual development gone awry.³⁹ Although their diagnostic criteria have changed in important ways throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, sadism and masochism are still listed as pathologies in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, published by the American Psychiatric Association, and sadomasochism is catalogued in the World Health Organization's *International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems*.

Of course, recourse to sexual desire as an essential and unchangeable element of one's personhood is not simply characteristic of pathologizing discourses, but is often used to promote broader acceptance and positive representation: a case in point in regard to sadomasochism may be found in the work of psychiatrist and sexologist Charles Moser. An active campaigner for de-pathologization and tolerance towards sadomasochism, Moser considers the practice "part of the repertoire of innate human sexual behaviors," a "sexual orientation" that cannot be altered and should not be denied.⁴⁰ Defending sexual practice or desire on the basis that it is congenital, of "natural" origins, or is otherwise involuntary, is indeed one of the most accepted strategies used by contemporary gay and lesbian rights groups. This approach was popularized by sexologists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Havelock Ellis, and Magnus Hirschfeld, who, although differing in their diagnostic conclusions, all used their research on the biological or physiological basis of same-sex desire to argue that same-sex sexual activity should not be subject to legal interdiction or punishment.⁴¹ Same-sex sexual activity, in and of itself, may no longer be legally categorized as a criminal offence in the Western world, but, with the exception of a scarce few figures who oppose the "no-choice" model of sexual orientation,⁴² many advocates of gay and lesbian rights still find crucial reasons to avoid and discourage narratives of sexual orientation that foreground the imperative of choice. The most prominent of these reasons is that the concept of choice is often employed by homophobic religious and conservative organizations as a means of pinning responsibility for "correct" or "normal" behavior squarely upon the individual. These fears were showcased recently in the widespread condemnation, within gay and lesbian communities, of American actress Cynthia Nixon's declaration, in a 2012

³⁹ For a rigorous examination of sadism and masochism within medical and psychoanalytic frameworks from the *fin-de-siècle* to the early twentieth century, see Alison Moore, "Rethinking Gendered Perversion and Degeneration in Visions of Sadism and Masochism, 1886–1930," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18, no. 1 (2009): 138–57.

⁴⁰ Charles Moser, "The Psychology of Sadomasochism (S/M)," *Magnus Hirschfeld Archive for Sexology*, <http://www2.hu-berlin.de/sexology/BIB/SM.htm>.

⁴¹ Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 4–12.

⁴² See, for example, John D'Emilio, *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 187; and Vera Whisman, *Queer by Choice: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Politics of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

edition of *The New York Times*, that she has chosen to be gay, a statement she later modified.⁴³ With significant political gains and losses attached to both the “sexuality-as-innate” and the “sexuality-as-choice” positions, these ongoing debates are routinely thrust into a mainstream spotlight by celebrities and public figures, as the Nixon case exemplifies. Such debates are, however, not at all new. Even Krafft-Ebing, who was so influential in propounding the notion of sexual perversion-as-psychopathology, conceded that particular deviant sexual acts can result simply from the conscious decision to perform them. Throughout the length of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Krafft-Ebing distinguished perversion—sexual psychopathology—from “perversity,” which he defined as “vice,” and warned against mistaking disease for “simple immorality.”⁴⁴ In the 1960s and 1970s, the assertion of chosen sexual preference gained traction within certain parts of the gay liberation movement, strongly tied to the emphasis on pride.⁴⁵ It is not the aim of this book to make a political case for or against sexual preference conceived as a choice. However, if this book responds to debates surrounding the figure of the choosing sexual subject, it does so in showing that the modern notion of sexual choice has a complex history that, in the case of aesthetic sexuality, changes constantly as it traverses time and culture, embedded within particular literary and philosophical movements, and evolving notions of subjectivity and art.

Sexual subjectivity and aesthetic philosophy

The construction of essentialized sexuality is often traced to discourses such as law, pedagogy, psychology, and psychoanalysis; the latter framework, in particular, provides a popular means of discussing sadomasochism in contemporary scholarship. In this book, I demonstrate that constructions of aesthetic sadomasochism—which I examine primarily through literature—are founded upon the discursive mechanisms of aesthetic theory and philosophy. The term “aesthetics” was coined by Alexander Baumgarten in his 1750 publication *Aesthetica*, although this work had less impact upon the blossoming branch of Enlightenment philosophy than that of British empiricists David Hume, Edmund Burke, Francis Hutcheson, and the third earl of Shaftesbury, works that influenced Kant’s prominent *Critique of Judgement* (1790). The roles and significations of the aesthetic have transfigured since the concept’s eighteenth-century origins. This polysemic ideology encompasses, as Eagleton observes, “a certain indeterminacy of definition which allows it to figure in a varied span of preoccupations”: it can denote one’s subjective experience and the object of experience, the perception

⁴³ Alex Witchel, “Life after ‘Sex,’” *New York Times*, 19 January, 2012; http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/22/magazine/cynthia-nixon-wit.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all; an example of the negative response to Nixon’s statement can be found on the gay activism website *Truth Wins Out*: Wayne Besen, “Cynthia Nixon Did Not Choose to Be Gay,” *Truth Wins Out*, 30 January, 2012; <http://www.truthwinsout.org/pressreleases/2012/01/21761/>.

⁴⁴ Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 53, 336.

⁴⁵ Sullivan, *Queer Theory*, 30.

of objects and a mode of consciousness.⁴⁶ In its initial conception, the aesthetic had less to do with art than with social and political overhaul: its development within the Enlightenment hinged upon its potential to encourage social harmony and political order by instating a model of instinctive morality and a mode of subjectivity ideal for the “material operations” of the bourgeoisie.⁴⁷

One of the ideological functions of eighteenth-century aesthetics is to discourage sexual indulgence. Baumgarten argues that the sensory cognition involved in aesthetic perception is corrupted by the bodily sensations of “lust” and “licentiousness.”⁴⁸ Sexual sensation is also banished from the aesthetic realm by Shaftesbury, who, in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711), distinguishes disinterested aesthetic pleasure from corporeal “self-passions” and “unrestrained desire,” a dissociation reinforced by Kant, who differentiates disinterested pleasure from the self-interest and gratification of sensuous desire that characterizes the “pleasant.”⁴⁹ Yet these injunctions did little to prevent sexuality from lacing the philosophical history of aesthetics. Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) describes the “rapturous and violent” pleasure associated with the lust for “generation” in its discussion of aesthetic pleasure.⁵⁰ In the late nineteenth century, Walter Pater’s aestheticism acquires a subtly sexual tone in its focus upon somatic experiences of “pleasurable sensations,” while Nietzsche’s aesthetics are explicitly sexualized throughout, exemplified by his suggestion that “the desire for art and beauty is an indirect longing for the ecstasy of sexual desire.”⁵¹ In the late twentieth century, Baudrillard posits sexuality as a central component of his aesthetic concept of seduction, whilst sexuality is integrated into models of aestheticized lifestyle discussed by Giddens, Bauman, and other contemporary theorists.

This aesthetic-sexual intertwining is not surprising considering that the matters at the heart of sexuality—subjectivity, corporeal sensation, and subject-object relations—are also matters that anchor the aesthetic. It has been argued that “no concept is more fundamental to modernity than the aesthetic,” particularly in its structuring of the human subject.⁵² The particular form of subjectivity produced by the aesthetic is, crucially, that which coheres with “an image of sheer self-determining autonomy,” with

⁴⁶ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 3; Shusterman, “Aesthetic Experience,” 217.

⁴⁷ Eagleton, *Ideology*, 17, 9.

⁴⁸ Baumgarten quoted in Richard Shusterman, “Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57, no. 3 (1999): 301.

⁴⁹ Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 216, 221; Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, ed. Nicholas Walker, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 48–50.

⁵⁰ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 40.

⁵¹ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance* (New York: Modern Library, 1873), xxvi; Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 248.

⁵² Geoffrey Galt Harpham, “Aesthetics and the Fundamentals of Modernity,” in *Aesthetics and Ideology*, ed. George Levine (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 124.

its “system of self-fashioning”;⁵³ the aesthetic is thus well equipped to show how sexuality can operate in this manner. It might be argued, furthermore, that no concept is more fundamental to the modern subject as sexuality; the relationship between these two instrumental categories, therefore, demands investigation.

Book structure and matters of terminology

This book examines particular cultural moments in the history of aesthetic philosophy that pertain, either through temporal proximity or patterns of influence, to the literary works and cultural discourses that have contributed to the construction of what we would now call sadomasochism. In employing this structure, I compose a selective history of aesthetic philosophy through the lens of sexuality; and, at the same time, further the case for the value of literature and philosophy to cultural histories of sexuality. I do not propose—at least not in all instances—that the discourses and practices pertaining to sadomasochism are directly influenced by texts propounding aesthetic principles, but rather that they reflect conceptions of art and aesthetic perception circulating at particular historical moments, to significant ends.

This book comprises seven following chapters, each of which, in a broadly chronological order, examines a key moment in sadomasochism’s cultural history since the eighteenth century. I do not aim to present an all-encompassing cultural history of sadomasochism: in accordance with the goals of this book, I omit, for example, modern medical, scientific, and legal discourses, and those that frame sadomasochism as a therapeutic or spiritual phenomenon. My focus lies, rather, upon forms of sadomasochism that contribute most significantly to the construction of aesthetic sexuality. Each chapter advances my argument by demonstrating the evolving aesthetic value of sadomasochism, the different ways in which the practice has been constructed as art, showing how different aspects of aesthetic sexuality—for example, its capacity to function as a form of self-creation and social communication, the significance of pleasure, choice, and cultivation—are emphasized in different historical periods. By detailing the construction of aesthetic forms of sadomasochism in different historical moments, I show how aesthetic sexuality has existed in modern Western culture before and alongside models of essentialized sexuality.

Although this book aims to provide a history of what we now call sadomasochism, I only use this or related terms in moments when they enter the discourses in question, or are otherwise relevant, thus avoiding an anachronistic or inappropriate use of cultural categories. In discussing the eighteenth-century novels of the Marquis de Sade, I use the phrase “libertine sexuality.” “Sexuality,” as I have discussed, typically denotes the essentialized product of the nineteenth-century’s *scientia sexualis*. However, when referring to “libertine sexuality,” and occasionally to “Sadean sexuality,” the term “sexuality” serves as shorthand for the array of desires, actions, and pleasures that structure the libertines’ sexual lives in Sade’s work. A similar logic underscores my use

⁵³ Eagleton, *Ideology*, 99; Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature* (London: Routledge, 1990), 167.

of “perverse decadent sexuality” when considering the nineteenth-century work of Algernon Charles Swinburne and Octave Mirbeau. Although the terms “sadism” and “masochism” were in relatively common use, at least in medical circles, by the time Mirbeau published his 1899 novel *Le Jardin des supplices*, the sexual practices and pleasures articulated in Mirbeau’s novel do not cohere with the pathological frameworks that contextualize the typical nineteenth-century deployment of these terms. My use of the term “perverse” in this context refers not to a pathological status but to a celebration of the intentionally non-normative. When considering the mid-twentieth-century literature of Georges Bataille and Pauline Réage, I refer to “violent sexuality,” as this expression encompasses the physical violence and power asymmetries, as well as the resultant violent shattering of identity, that gained literary prominence during this time. I use “violent sexuality” and not “sexual violence” due to the connotations of non-consensual abuse currently attached to the latter phrase, from which the eroticism in the work of Bataille and Réage must be distinguished. I employ the terms “somasochism” and “BDSM” in Chapter 7 when considering post-1980 pornographic and political writing as these terms are commonly employed within this cultural moment, severed, at least for many pro-sex feminists, from any pathological grounding.⁵⁴

This use of diverse terminology indicates more than simply an evasion of anachronistic lexicon, also highlighting the way in which different historical forms of what we may now group under the same name encompass irreconcilable differences. Compare, for instance, contemporary BDSM and the work of the Marquis de Sade. The influence of Sade’s work, which has traversed centuries of somasochism-themed literature and cultural mobilizations, remains evident today as the *divin marquis* enjoys widespread popularity within contemporary BDSM subcultures. This is demonstrated, for example, by the tendency of fetish clothing and equipment retail businesses to operate under Sade’s namesake, and by the frequent usage of “libertine”—a term sourced from Sade’s work and the author’s reputation as such—as a proud self-descriptor. However, that which occurs in the work of Sade—homicide, rape, and torture on a quotidian basis, for example—and that which anchors contemporary BDSM communities—such as the imperatives of consent and mutual pleasure—are simply not comparable. To use the same word, “somasochism,” to describe Sadean sexual culture and other historical moments is thus profoundly problematic. Accordingly, this book aims to map a particular history of what would now be commonly thought of as somasochism, highlighting the dramatic permutations of the practices, pleasures, and aesthetic representations now associated with this term.

Just as one cannot posit a stable phenomenon called “somasochism” that has existed throughout the past few centuries, so too would it be erroneous to propose aesthetic sexuality as an entity that could have been considered as such throughout the historical moments I examine. “Aesthetic sexuality” is a heuristic category: it enables an investigation of constructions of sexual subjectivity that have existed in different

⁵⁴ The acronym “BDSM,” whose contemporary subcultural use is more common than that of “somasochism,” refers to a range of “kinky” activities: bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, sadism, and masochism.

ways at different times within varying contexts, significant in their structural rapport with notions of art and autonomy. The notion of aesthetic sexuality enables a certain understanding of past formulations of what we call “sexuality,” but the category itself is inescapably bound to the present.

I begin this cultural history in the next chapter by focusing on the work of the Marquis de Sade in order to demonstrate the way in which libertine sexual acts are constructed as performable by potentially anyone, and not a particular type of person. Using the novels *Les 120 journées de Sodome ou l'École du libertinage* (1785), *Justine ou Les Malheurs de la vertu* (1791), and *Histoire de Juliette ou Les Prospérités du vice* (1797), I show how Sade's libertines adhere to the principles of aesthetic judgment articulated by Kant, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Burke. In these texts, aesthetic judgment is articulated as a natural and involuntary process, albeit one that paradoxically requires cultivation to achieve its correct and universal form. In Sade's novels, this universal standard is signified by the perception of the beauty of crime, which drives libertine sexuality. In being consciously and deliberately constructed as instinctive and involuntary aspects of the libertines' aesthetic judgment, libertine sex acts critique the ideological imperatives of the eighteenth-century aesthetic and illuminate the threat posed by aesthetics to the Enlightenment's prized autonomous and rational subject.

In the third chapter, I examine nineteenth-century decadent literature to argue that it constructs perverse decadent sexuality as an artificial and refined taste and form of aesthetic production. Focusing on the poems “Dolores,” “Anactoria,” and “Laus Veneris” from *Poems and Ballads* (1866) by Algernon Charles Swinburne, and the novel *Le Jardin des supplices* by Octave Mirbeau (1899), I argue that the subject of perverse decadent sexuality reflects, in a hyperbolized manner, the aestheticist theory of Walter Pater, an argument supported by brief comparisons to *La Marquise de Sade* (1887) by Rachilde and *À rebours* (1884) by Joris-Karl Huysmans. This perverse subject performs an aesthetic appraisal of torture in *Le Jardin des supplices* and of pain in *Poems and Ballads*, both phenomena marked by the fusion of beauty and grotesquerie. Perverse decadent pleasure, founded upon aesthetic pleasure, also becomes an aesthetic production, troped within the flower figure in *Le Jardin des supplices* and materializing as form as it is embedded within the aural beauty of Swinburne's verse. Perverse decadent pleasure is endowed with a refined and elite status to criticize Europe's national and colonial governance and to situate perverse subjectivity outside the boundaries of what is deemed vulgar bourgeois society.

In Chapter 4, I provide an analysis of Nietzsche's aesthetic philosophy, which he details primarily in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) and *The Will to Power* (1901). In the two chapters that follow, I show how Nietzsche's aesthetic philosophy is integrated into French avant-garde literature of the 1950s, which constructs violent sexuality as a sublime Dionysian aesthetic experience that serves to dissolve individual subjectivity and refashion collective subjectivity. In Chapter 6, I demonstrate how Pauline Réage's *Histoire d'O* (1954) and Jean de Berg's *L'image* (1956) do so by utilizing the principles of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*—crucially, the themes of Apollo and Dionysus—while in Chapter 5, I demonstrate how Georges Bataille's *L'Érotisme* (1957) and *Histoire de l'œil* (1928) incorporate these key themes within the physiological framework of

The Will to Power. In their construction of violent sexuality, the work of Réage and Bataille also enacts Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics, undercutting any essential foundation of truth and subjectivity.

In the seventh chapter, I investigate American political and pornographic writing between 1981 and 2002, including essays from *Coming to Power* (1981) and *The Second Coming: a Leatherdyke Reader* (1996), and essays and fictional works by Patrick Califia. I suggest that in this cultural moment, sadomasochism is constructed as an aesthetic performance of power in accordance with the precepts of postmodern aesthetics, espoused primarily in Baudrillard's *Seduction* (1979) and also in Foucault's *This is Not a Pipe* (1968), Jameson's "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" (1984), and Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990). I demonstrate that sadomasochistic power is constructed as explicitly arbitrary, ritualistic, and reversible, a form of aesthetic signification that contrasts with what is posited as the real and irreversible structures of social power. Through the emphasis placed on signs in sadomasochism and the pleasure derived from them, it is also suggested, within these discourses, that power itself is constructed through verbal and visual signification, confusing distinctions between power that is performed and real. I demonstrate that the contradiction staged here in the reification and dissolution of distinctions between real and performed power highlights a significant quandary that postmodernism poses for aesthetic sexuality.

I conclude this book by investigating what the model of aesthetic sexuality developed in the preceding chapters reveals about the most conspicuous articulations of sadomasochism in popular culture today, that is, in mainstream fashion and the subcultural forms defined against it. In this discussion, I draw upon fetish magazines *Skin Two* and *Marquis* to suggest that the spectacular aesthetics of fetish clothes define the wearer as embodying a form of perversion constructed as superior to the norm from which it deviates, constituting subcultural capital as well as an eroticized mode of elitist social distinction and self-fashioning. This form of aesthetic sexuality challenges a central binary opposition that subcultural participants and cultural critics alike have set up in order to explain the use of fetish fashion within mainstream and subcultural contexts.

Each chapter of this book demonstrates how, in different historical periods, what we now understand to be sadomasochism is constructed as a form of art, a chosen means of social communication and self-creation whose meaning is located in its aesthetic value—at surface level—rather than in any presumed underlying cause. In mapping the evolution of sadomasochism's aesthetic value, I show how one particular type of aesthetic sexuality has existed in modern Western culture since the late eighteenth century.

Universal perversion and the laws of judgment: the Marquis de Sade

After Krafft-Ebing used Sade's name to title one of the many perversions detailed within *Psychopathia Sexualis*, the category of psychopathology, in the specific sense that Krafft-Ebing employed in 1890 and in variations that would follow, was frequently projected backwards to characterize the Marquis and his work. This diagnosis is, of course, highly anachronistic: the sex acts described by Sade are many things, but they are not psychopathologies, at the very least because this specific mode of classification had not yet developed within Sade's time. On the contrary, the sexual architecture of Sade's work displays characteristics that oppose those of psychopathology and associated constructions of essentialized sexuality, and that are more compatible with the notion of aesthetic sexuality. That which in Sade's work would now be readily although not unproblematically associated with sadomasochism—the abundant episodes in which torture, murder, and humiliation cause spasms of sexual pleasure—is described here as libertine or Sadean sexuality. Sade's brand of libertine sexuality can be seen as founded upon the principles of eighteenth-century aesthetic philosophy, serving as a means of exercising aesthetic judgment and operating as a subject of aesthetic cognition precisely in order to undermine and critique the ideologies within those principles. Although this moment does not foreground the element of choice, it does establish libertine sexuality as a mode of practice that can be adopted by, and indeed prescribed to, potentially anyone. It is precisely this necessary freedom of action that exposes the hazardous position of the aesthetic within eighteenth-century moral regimes.

This particular sexual production is demonstrated within three key texts by Sade: *Histoire de Juliette ou Les Prospérités du vice* (1797), *Justine ou Les Malheurs de la vertu* (1791), and *Les 120 journées de Sodome ou l'École du libertinage*, written in 1785 and first published in 1904. These works are productively read in rapport with the aesthetic theory articulated in the following texts: *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711) by Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury, a work that collates a series of previously published essays; David Hume's essay "Of the Standard of Taste" (1757); Francis Hutcheson's *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725); Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of*

the Sublime and Beautiful (1757); and the *Critique of Judgement* (1790) by Immanuel Kant. Each one of these texts was translated into French, most of them well before Sade began writing: Shaftesbury's *œuvre* became available to Francophones in 1769, that of Hume throughout the 1750s and 1760s, Hutcheson's *Inquiry* in 1749, and Burke's *Enquiry* in 1765. The *Critique of Judgement* was translated into French in 1796, after Sade had written *Justine* and *Les 120 journées de Sodome*, but one year prior to the publication of *Juliette*. Although *Juliette* contains rhetoric that approaches the discourse used in the *Critique of Judgement*, I do not suggest that Sade's work was directly influenced by Kant's, or by that of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Burke, but that it partakes in a discourse sustained by the texts written by these philosophers, a discourse that was certainly circulating amongst French intellectuals, a milieu within which Sade was firmly embedded, however scandalous his work was considered. I refer only to the concepts relayed by Kant, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Burke when I cite "eighteenth-century aesthetics" for the purpose of concision. The philosophers from the United Kingdom are productively read together as they take a similar empirical approach to the physiological and cognitive conditions of aesthetic judgment. Kant's *Critique of Judgement* extends this body of work to widen the philosophical scope of the aesthetic, foregrounding its centrality to conceptions of subjectivity and its relation to rationality, instinct, freedom, and nature. The philosophical tradition Kant writes within differs from that of the British empiricists, and the aesthetic receives a dissimilar treatment in their divergent schools of thought. In Kant's idealist metaphysics, aesthetic judgment is "disinterested" and distinguished from any form of corporeal interest, particularly any notion of sexuality.¹ Indeed, Kant's aesthetics serve to separate knowledge from the sensual and the corporeal, whilst for the British empiricists, the aesthetic is implicated in bodily appetites and sensation. Kant's aesthetic expositions were influenced by, and also critique, the work of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Burke, and Hume, but, despite their differences, Kant may be read fruitfully alongside these writers in order to demonstrate Sade's engagement with aesthetic philosophy.

Pleasure, pain, and the libertine brain

In eighteenth-century aesthetics, judgments of taste—*aesthetic appraisal*—are not considered to be contingent upon qualities of the studied object but rather upon the cognitive faculties of the judging subject: "beauty, without a reference to the feeling of the subject, is nothing by itself."² Beauty is not an objective quality but is generated by the judging mind, being, for Hutcheson, the "Idea rais'd in us," which produces a feeling of pleasure; for Kant, this feeling validates and gives meaning to the classification of beauty.³ Although Kant emphasizes the importance of subjective processes, his treatise

¹ Kant, *Judgement*, 48–50.

² *Ibid.*, 65.

³ Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, trans. Wolfgang Leidhold (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004), 23; Kant, *Judgement*, 30–1.

also considers subject-object relations, a point also considered important by Hume, who concedes that objects may have particular qualities that produce perceptions of beauty or deformity.⁴

That judgments of taste structure Sadean sexuality, determining the libertines' "modalités ou manières d'exister," is suggested by their rhetoric: preferences for particular sex acts are deemed by one libertine to be questions "*de goût*" and by another of "philosophie."⁵ Libertinism is guided by sense perception: Juliette declares that "je juge tout par les sensations," echoing Durcet of *Les 120 journées de Sodome*, who states that it is only the senses "qui doivent nous guider dans toutes les actions de la vie."⁶ Like Hume and Burke, Sade's libertines compare aesthetic judgment, which guides their sexual preferences, with culinary taste, suggesting that "il n'y a aucune raison pour trouver une fantaisie de table moins extraordinaire qu'une fantaisie de lit."⁷ Libertine taste, for Sade's characters, is contingent upon the structure of the subject rather than the object. Delbène, Juliette's first mentor, declares that one must not ascribe "une existence propre aux objets de ces perceptions intérieures" and warns against confusing the quality of the object with "des perceptions qui sont dans notre esprit," a distinction also made by the libertines of *Justine*: "l'unanimité prouve de la conformité dans les organes, mais rien en faveur de la chose aimée."⁸ Indeed, even if "les trois quarts de l'univers peuvent trouver délicieuse l'odeur d'une rose," it does not prove that "cette odeur soit véritablement agréable."⁹

The subjective perception of objects is considered within eighteenth-century aesthetic philosophy to produce a feeling of pleasure or pain. According to Kant's conception of human cognition, the faculty of judgment mediates between the faculty of desire, which is ruled by reason, and the faculty of knowledge, which is ruled by the understanding, and when these cognitive faculties are struck by the object in a harmonious fashion, inciting their free play, the feeling of pleasure is produced.¹⁰ The pleasure of aesthetic judgment is associated with sexual pleasure for Burke: the "sexual urges" that draw men to women are produced in part by a woman's "personal beauty." Pleasure associated with the impulse to generate is "rapturous and violent [...] the highest of pleasure of sense."¹¹ While pleasure is quick to subside, pain is more intense

⁴ Kant, *Judgement*; David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," in *Moral Philosophy*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), 347, 350.

⁵ Marquis de Sade, *Juliette ou Les Prospérités du vice*, tome 1 (Paris: Éditions 10/18, 1976), 45, 67; "modalités or manners of existing"; "of taste"; "philosophy."

⁶ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 149; Marquis de Sade, *Les 120 journées de Sodome ou L'École du libertinage* (Paris: Éditions 10/18, 1975), 235; "I judge everything by my sensations"; "that must guide us in all the actions of life."

⁷ Hume, "Standard of Taste," 347; Burke, *Enquiry*, 14; Marquis de Sade, *Justine ou Les Malheurs de la vertu* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1973), 198; "there is no reason for finding a mealtime whim less extraordinary than a bedtime whim."

⁸ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 44; Sade, *Justine*, 199; "an existence belonging to the objects of these inner perceptions"; "perceptions that are in our mind"; "the unanimity proves conformity in the organs, but nothing in favor of the admired object."

⁹ Sade, *Justine*, 199; "three quarters of the universe can find the scent of a rose delicious"; "this scent is truly agreeable."

¹⁰ Kant, *Judgement*, 14–6, 31.

¹¹ Burke, *Enquiry*, 40.

and prolonged—"the mind naturally continues in something like the same condition, after the cause which first produced it has ceased to operate"—and is caused when the perception of an object stimulates "a tension, contraction, or violent emotion of the nerves."¹² Pain and pleasure, independent sensations not contingent upon the removal of the other, are enabled by the intimate connection between body and mind: while "certain affections of the mind [...] cause certain changes in the body [...] certain powers and properties in bodies [...] work a change in the mind."¹³

The realm of beautiful objects encompasses particular actions: human actions can be discerned, Shaftesbury writes, as "fair and shapely," as displaying "natural beauty," and thus, as Burke states, "come within the province of the judgment."¹⁴ In Sade's novels, beauty may be perceived as a quality of criminal actions, whether they are simply conceptualized or physically performed, inflicted upon others or upon oneself, and this mode of perception—the crux of libertine judgment—produces a feeling of pleasure in the judging subject. In Sade's novels, pleasure derived from crime is the basis of libertine pleasure and the motivation to perform libertine acts. Crime's aesthetic status is suggested by its theatricality, by the infamous *tableaux vivants* formed by the libertines' sexual escapades. Throughout both *Les 120 journées de Sodome* and *Juliette*, the libertines are deemed "acteurs," their surroundings a "scène."¹⁵ Crime's aesthetic status is also indicated by references to aesthetic form: Juliette varies the composition of tortured bodies "pour contraster," her lover Clairwil describes to her the pleasure incited by the beauty of a flagellated victim, "ces flots pourprés contrastant aussi bien avec la teinte des lys d'une peau douce et blanche," and Juliette soon achieves the same effect on Clairwil herself, who, "me fait voir son cul: il ressemblait à de l'écarlate et contrastait de la manière la plus agréable avec l'éclatante blancheur de sa peau."¹⁶ If performed expertly and with flair, libertine exploits can be considered an art: Juliette "fouette avec art," Clairwil proclaims that she has mastered "l'art de foutre," and Juliette's friend Durand displays "l'art de donner du plaisir en en recevant," notably in being able to "branler le cul" of Juliette while Juliette "l'enculai[t]."¹⁷ The Saint-Père explains to Juliette: "voilà l'art: il consiste à faire mourir, le plus longtemps possible, un peu tous les jours."¹⁸ The "attrait" of crime is founded in its moral transgression, its classification as vice.¹⁹ The Duc de Blangis of *Les 120 journées de Sodome* declares that "ce n'est pas l'objet du libertinage qui nous anime, mais l'idée du mal; qu'en conséquence, c'est pour

¹² Ibid., 34, 35, 132.

¹³ Ibid., 32–3, 130.

¹⁴ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 326; Burke, *Enquiry*, 23.

¹⁵ "Actors"; "stage."

¹⁶ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 318, 281, 288; "to contrast"; "these purple rivulets contrasting so well with her lily complexion of soft and white skin"; "showed me her ass: it looked scarlet and contrasted in the most agreeable manner with the dazzling whiteness of her skin."

¹⁷ Marquis de Sade, *Histoire de Juliette ou Les Prospérités du vice*, tome 2 (Paris: Éditions 10/18, 1977), 102, 439; Sade, *Juliette* 1, 480; "whips with art"; "art of fucking"; "the art of giving pleasure while receiving it"; "masturbate the ass"; "sodomized her."

¹⁸ Sade, *Juliette* 2, 188; "here is the art: it consists in causing death, for the longest time possible, a little each day."

¹⁹ Sade, *Sodome*, 234; "attractiveness."

le mal seul qu'on bande et non pas pour l'objet, en telle sorte que si cet objet était dénué de la possibilité de nous faire faire le mal nous ne banderions plus pour lui."²⁰ The arousing beauty of crime, however, is at odds with the notion that judgment is contingent upon subjective processes rather than a feature of the object. In this respect, Sade enacts a contradiction founded in the work of eighteenth-century aesthetic philosophers, who, despite rejecting the notion of objective beauty, propose that particular formal qualities—such as unity for Kant, Hutcheson, and Shaftesbury, symmetry for Shaftesbury, and uniformity and order for Hutcheson, Shaftesbury, and Burke—are inherently beautiful, suggesting that beauty is not simply generated by the judging mind but is an objective quality.²¹

In Sade's novels, the judgment of crime as beautiful produces pleasure through the intimate connection between mind and body; crime lights the libertine loin via the brain, indicating an "eroticism 'of the head.'"²² The libertine Noirceuil, evoking a Kantian concept, declares that pleasure results when an object strikes the brain's "fluide nerveux" in a harmonious fashion.²³ A close connection between brain and body is suggested by Juliette when, having committed murder, she is startled by its effects: "et voilà donc les résultats du crime! Dieu! quel est son empire sur une tête comme la mienne, et combien il sert au plaisir!"²⁴ In dialogue with a lover, having whipped the buttocks of a young girl into bloody shreds, Juliette assures Durand: "j'ai été pour le moins aussi heureuse que toi; vois mon con, comme il est mouillé"; Durand asks her: "et ta tête était-elle à la chose?" to which Juliette responds, affirmatively, simply with "Oh!"²⁵ The role of the mind does not suggest an analytic basis to pleasure—this would be incongruous with Sade's conception of man as "une espèce de plante absolument matérielle"—but highlights the role that the cognitive faculties play in libertine judgment.²⁶ Cognition leads to bodily pleasure as the flesh "s'embrase aux voluptés de l'esprit"; the key sensations that traverse the mind and body for the libertines are pleasure and pain.²⁷ Offering a formulation curiously close to that of Burke, Noirceuil proposes that pain occurs when the object transmits atoms that strike the neural fluids in such a way that "ils leur présentent ici des angles, les piquent, les repoussent et ne s'enchaînent jamais."²⁸ Like Burke, Noirceuil contends that the feeling of pain is

²⁰ Sade, *Sodome*, 179; "it is not the object of libertinage that drives us, but the idea of evil; consequently, it is for evil that we harden and not for the object, in such a way that if this object was devoid of the possibility of making us do evil, we would no longer stiffen for it."

²¹ Kant, *Judgement*, 27; Hutcheson, *Inquiry*, 59; Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 274, 414; Hutcheson, *Inquiry*, 64; Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 203; Burke, *Enquiry*, 112.

²² Annie Le Brun, *Sade: A Sudden Abyss*, trans. Camille Naish (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1990), 174; Marcel Hénaff, *Sade, the Invention of the Libertine Body*, trans. Xavier Callahan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 102.

²³ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 260; "neural fluid."

²⁴ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 294; "and there you have it, the results of crime! God! such is its influence upon a mind like mine, and how it offers such pleasure!"

²⁵ Sade, *Juliette* 2, 449; "I was at least as happy as you; see how wet my cunt is"; "and your mind, was it excited too?"

²⁶ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 260; "a type of absolutely material plant."

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 404; "inflames from the mind's pleasures."

²⁸ Burke, *Enquiry*, 132; Sade, *Juliette* 1, 260; "they present them with angles, sting them, repel them, and never fuse."

“infiniment plus vive et plus active” than the feeling of pleasure, producing a stronger impact on the nerves.²⁹ Yet the libertines find a means of appreciating pain, indicated in Noircœur’s rhetorical question: “qui empêche qu’avec de l’habitude je ne m’accoutume à me trouver aussi bien de l’être par les atomes qui repoussent que par ceux qui accrochent?”³⁰ Pleasure results as the nerves are excited “en apercevant réellement ou fictivement dans l’objet qui nous sert, l’espèce de beauté” or “en voyant éprouver à cet objet la plus forte sensation possible; or, il n’est aucune sorte de sensation qui soit plus vive que celle de la douleur.”³¹ The poignancy of the pain inflicted upon another gives pleasure that is always granted in direct proportion to the strength of the act: “plus son humiliation, sa dégradation est complète, et plus notre jouissance est entière,” Noircœur promises.³²

The tyranny of nature and the efficacy of machines

According to Kant, aesthetic judgment makes “possible a system of experience according to particular laws of nature,” “laws of nature” conceived as *a priori* principles, that is, principles that are universal and necessary and are not contingent upon empirical experience.³³ For Kant, nature and universality are correspondent; he contends that “universal laws of nature have their ground in our Understanding” while empirical experience “rests on the legislation of the Reason” (18, 13). Since judgment mediates between the cognitive faculties of reason and the understanding, it involves both the empirical experience of particular objects and *a priori* principles, where the former is subsumed beneath the latter (16). Thus, it is as though one’s experience of empirical objects is legislated by the universal laws of nature that rule the understanding (18). Although judgment is a function of the cognitive faculties, it is not determined by reason or by cognitive processes (4, 32, 30), appearing to be logical but, as an instantaneous occurrence, differentiated from “logical judgment” (251, 161). Aesthetic judgment is considered to be involuntary: the mind cannot help but “discern proportion, distinguish sound and scan each sentiment or thought which comes before it.”³⁴ Also involuntary is the feeling produced by judgment: the mind feels “the soft and harsh, the agreeable and disagreeable” and cannot “withhold its admiration and ecstasy, its aversion and scorn.” Aesthetic judgment persists even during sleep and whether taste is, in Shaftesbury’s words, “false or corrupt,” the object acting upon a passive mind that cannot, for Hutcheson, deliberately alter perception or the resultant feeling of pleasure

²⁹ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 260; “infinitely more intense and more active.”

³⁰ Ibid.; “what prevents me from accustoming myself, through habit, to being just as aroused by the atoms that repel than by those that attach?”

³¹ Sade, *Justine*, 204–5; “on noticing in the object that serves us, a kind of beauty, real or imaginary”; “on seeing this object undergo the strongest sensation possible; now, there is no kind of sensation that is more intense than that of pain.”

³² Sade, *Juliette* 1, 262; “the greater his humiliation, his degradation is complete, and the more our pleasure is entire.”

³³ Kant, *Judgement*, 18.

³⁴ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 172.

or pain.³⁵ Although the mechanical process of judgment must not be confused with reasoning, the role of reason is not dismissed entirely; for Kant, aesthetic judgment mediates between, and therefore involves, the faculties of the understanding and reason.³⁶ Reason is considered by Shaftesbury as a principal element in man and, for Burke, to be employed “wherever the best Taste differs from the worst.”³⁷

Judgments of taste are also instinctive for Sade’s libertines; libertine judgment, the perception of crime as beautiful, coheres with natural law. While the libertines may control the material circumstances of crime—what it involves and who its victims are, for example—they do not control their desire to perform crime or the pleasure it produces. The libertines’ recourse to nature is summarized by the Duc de Blangis in *Les 120 journées de Sodome*: “c’est de la nature que je les ai reçus, ces penchants, et je l’irriterais en y résistant; si elle me les a donnés mauvais, c’est qu’ils devenaient ainsi nécessaires à ses vues. Je ne suis dans ses mains qu’une machine qu’elle meut à son gré.”³⁸ This notion is also apparent in *Juliette*, in which the impulse to commit crime comes “de la nature [...] le meurtre est une de ses lois; chaque fois qu’elle en éprouve le besoin, elle nous en inspire le goût, et nous obéissons involontairement.”³⁹ Nature’s laws are precise and ordered, determining the libertines’ repertoire of lubricities through rigorous *a priori* principles. Nature dictates that “les hommes naquirent tous isolés, envieux, cruels et despotes,” impels the strong to abuse the weak, and rules that “ce ne soit qu’au malheur de mon prochain que ma volupté puisse éclore.”⁴⁰ Nature’s laws are strict and require absolute submission so that the libertine has no choice but to “suis ses inspirations,” as Dèlbene advises Juliette.⁴¹ The universality and necessity of natural law is evidenced by the absence of statutes and codes: nature requires no formal declaration of her laws, “elle n’en imprime qu’une seule au cœur de tous les hommes”; experienced as instinct, they entail, as Kant would state, “a universal rule that [one] cannot state.”⁴² With this deep-seated authority, nature is enslaving and thus, as one libertine states, “notre volonté n’est pas libre.”⁴³ Sade’s characters may vie for power and mastery over other men, but ultimately they have no free will and are not “purely voluntary beings” as it has been suggested:⁴⁴ their actions, dictated by instinct, are always involuntary. The libertines do not ravage and detach from nature, as many critics argue, but rather

³⁵ Ibid., 174; Hutcheson, *Inquiry*, 19, 21.

³⁶ Kant, *Judgement*, 16.

³⁷ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 282; Burke, *Enquiry*, 26.

³⁸ Sade, *Sodome*, 22–3; “it is from nature that I have received them, these inclinations, and I would irritate her in resisting them; if she gave me bad ones, it is because they became necessary to her designs. I am in her hands but a machine that she moves to her liking.”

³⁹ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 160; “from nature [...] murder is one of her laws; each time she experiences the need for it, she inspires us with the taste for it, and we obey involuntarily.”

⁴⁰ Sade, *Justine*, 72, 351; Sade, *Juliette* 1, 105; “men were all born isolated, envious, cruel, and despotic”; “it is only through misfortune that the next of my pleasures can bloom.”

⁴¹ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 32; “obey her inspirations.”

⁴² Sade, *Juliette* 2, 128; Kant *Judgement*, 91; “she etches just one [law] in the heart of all men.”

⁴³ Sade, *Juliette* 2, 75; “our will is not free.”

⁴⁴ Anne C. Vila, “Sensibility, Anthropology, and Libertinage in Laclos and Sade,” in *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), 292.

demonstrate “authentic submission to nature.”⁴⁵ The similarity that these principles bear with the materialism of Julien Offray de La Mettrie is illuminated by Hénaff: La Mettrie, who published the at-the-time radical book *L’Homme Machine* in 1747, asserts man’s “enslavement” and writes that “in no way do we determine what governs us; we are not at all in charge of our sensations.”⁴⁶

In Sade’s conception, the authority of nature means that taking pleasure in crime is “purement physique [...] n’est que mécanique,” a matter of cause and effect.⁴⁷ This mechanized conception of the body is reflected in descriptions that demonstrate how the body responds to certain stimuli—notably, the suffering of others and performances of crime—as an automated motion in accordance with “machines made of flesh”: Noircueil, “saisissant en dessous les mamelles de sa femme, il les lui tiraille au point de lui faire pousser des cris, dont l’effet est si puissant sur ses organes, qu’il en perd son foutre à l’instant.”⁴⁸ The mechanized quality of Noircueil’s orgasm is also apparent in Juliette’s: in response to a murder she has just committed, Juliette recounts the “effets que j’éprouvais: l’embrasement du fluide nerveux fut tel à cette action, que je me sentis inondée de foutre en la commettant.”⁴⁹ Ejaculation, with its spontaneity and violence, mimics the mechanics of a pistol, an association reinforced throughout *Juliette*, *Justine*, and *Les 120 journées de Sodome* by the continual reference to penises as “engins” and orgasms as “décharges.”⁵⁰ Sade illustrates this mechanized conception of the human body with the metaphor of the automated dildo, “un godemiché doux et flexible qui, par le moyen d’un ressort, la limait perpétuellement, en lui lançant, dans le vagin, de quart d’heure en quart d’heure, des flots d’une liqueur chaude et gluante.”⁵¹ Human beings, in Sade’s conception, are also machines bearing a body-like form.⁵² Sade’s machines own an operating center—a brain, a mind—but not necessarily a psyche.⁵³ This absence of a psychic interior means that a conception of psychopathology, which would become so popular within the late nineteenth century, is in no way applicable. The notion of instinct is at play here, but it is a very different idea of nature than that which characterized the nineteenth-century notion of psychopathology. In refusing the possibility of an “inside/outside and psyche/body” divide, Sade “invalidates everything that has been presented as the body’s symptomatological functioning.”⁵⁴

⁴⁵ James M. Glass, “Modernity and the Marquis De Sade: A Question of Perception and the Limits of Self,” in *Sade: His Ethics and Rhetoric*, ed. Colette V. Michael (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 52.

⁴⁶ La Mettrie quoted and translated in Hénaff, *Sade*, 24.

⁴⁷ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 271; “purely physical [...] is but mechanical.”

⁴⁸ Hénaff, *Sade*, 53; Sade, *Juliette* 1, 182–3; “seizing from below his wife’s breasts, he pulls them to the point of making her emit screams, whose effect on his organs was so powerful that he lost his come instantaneously.”

⁴⁹ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 294; “effects that I experienced: the kindling of the neural fluids was such in response to this action that I felt myself inundated with come as I was committing it.”

⁵⁰ “Engines”; “discharges.”

⁵¹ Sade, *Juliette* 2, 372; “a soft and flexible dildo that, through means of a spring, perpetually thrust into her, every fifteen minutes ejaculating in her vagina torrents of warm and sticky liquor.”

⁵² Roland Barthes, *Sade/Fourier/Loyola*, trans. Richard Miller (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 152.

⁵³ Hénaff, *Sade*, 21.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 23, 21.

Barthes' notion that "in Sade there is no bodily secret to seek, but only a practice to achieve" could indeed apply more broadly to the concept of aesthetic sexuality.⁵⁵ The absence of subjectivity and psychic interiority is reflected in the predominance of dialogue and action—observable, positivistic phenomena—to the near exclusion of inner reflection. Without psyche or subjectivity, Sade's libertines enact their sexuality automatically and mechanically in coherence with the body's efficient machine-like constitution, under the direction of nature's laws.

Yet the libertines' relation to nature is inconsistent: occasionally, they do not follow but transgress natural law, a tendency apparent in Juliette's discussion of sodomy, in which she declares that by "braver sur un point les lois de la nature," one discovers the pleasure of "les transgressant toutes, les unes après les autres."⁵⁶ Similarly, in *Les 120 journées de Sodome*, libertine acts are said to be "outrageantes aux lois, à la nature et à la religion."⁵⁷ While these passages may refer to the cultural laws that "nous croyons être les lois de la nature," they may also illustrate Sade's tendency to have his characters contradict their previous claims, which is also apparent in the libertines' declaration that crime cannot be deemed criminal precisely because it is natural.⁵⁸ Cultural law determines the classifications of vice and virtue, and thus these terms are considered to hold "aucune signification réelle, ils sont arbitraires et ne donnent que des idées purement locales."⁵⁹ However, these apparently arbitrary concepts also occupy significant positions in the scheme of nature, which is revered as universal.

Reasonable tastes

The instinctive and involuntary process of libertine judgment may not involve rational analysis, but, insofar as this process, in principle, coheres with natural law, it is considered to be reasonable. Libertine philosophy, as many critics have noted, emphasizes the use of reason. Reason is incorporated within libertine judgment in that it characterizes the overall action of judging and not the processes involved in it, a notion suggested in Delbène's exposition: "qu'est-ce que la raison? C'est cette faculté qui m'est donnée par la nature de me déterminer pour tel objet et de fuir tel autre, en proportion de la dose de plaisir ou de peine reçue de ces objets: calcul absolument soumis à mes sens."⁶⁰ Sexual action in Sade's writing requires reason founded upon physical sensation, which is enabled through aesthetic judgment, an automatic and

⁵⁵ Barthes, *Sade*, 158.

⁵⁶ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 306; "confronting the laws of nature on one point"; "transgressing all of them, one after the other."

⁵⁷ Sade, *Sodome*, 42; "offensive to the laws of nature and religion."

⁵⁸ Sade, *Justine*, 209; Maurice Blanchot, "Sade," in *Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, & Other Writings*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 63; "we believe to be the laws of nature."

⁵⁹ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 95; "no real signification, they are arbitrary and give only purely local ideas."

⁶⁰ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 43; "what is reason? It is this faculty that has been given to me by nature to determine me for one such objet and to have me flee from another, in proportion to the dose of pleasure or of pain received from these objects: a calculation absolutely governed by my senses."

involuntary occurrence that fits logically within the scope of human activity. It is logical to seek out objects that produce pleasure, even though this pleasure is “le résultat du mécanisme le plus grossier et le plus matériel.”⁶¹ Sade’s fusion of reason and instinct mimics the synthesis invoked in Kant’s notion that judgment mediates between the faculties of reason and the understanding.⁶² However, as I shortly demonstrate, Kant’s attempt to reconcile the autonomous use of reason and the rule of instinct is problematized by Sade’s construction of libertine sexuality, which highlights how the aesthetic dissolves the freedom and will that Kant’s rational subject was considered to own.

Universal perversion

In eighteenth-century aesthetic philosophy, instinctive judgments of taste can be classified as meeting or deviating from a universal standard. Aesthetic judgment involves the necessary subsumption of particular empirical objects beneath universal *a priori* principles, that is, beneath “universal laws,” and therefore although judgments of taste are subjective, their universality produces an impression of objectivity.⁶³ Since aesthetic judgment is a mode of cognition common to all human beings, it may be deemed “*sensus communis aestheticus*,” the pleasure taken by the judging subject demonstrative of the pleasure of “every judging being in general.”⁶⁴ The universal standard of taste is considered by Hume to reconcile “the various sentiments of men” and indicate, for Shaftesbury, which judgments are correct and incorrect, because, despite what Burke considers to be disparities in intellectual capacity, the “standard both of reason and Taste is the same in all human creatures” as every human’s sense organs are uniform in structure.⁶⁵

In the work of Sade, the universal standard of taste is represented by libertine judgment, that is, by the perception of crime as beautiful and by the pleasure that results. The libertine sex acts impelled by this mode of judgment are distinctly perverse—perverse in the sense of purposefully grating against moral, sexual, and aesthetic norms and laws—but, being performed and sanctioned by the majority of the libertine population, they are also universal, rendering libertinism “an imperative of universal perversion”; the libertine “speaks with his singular gesture *in the name of generality*.”⁶⁶ The universality of libertine taste is declared by the judging subjects: Saint-Fond tells Juliette that despotism “plaît à tout le monde [...] tous les hommes tendent au despotisme” and the libertine Chigi advises his friends that, in being driven by nature, it

⁶¹ Sade, *Juliette* 1, “the result of the most crude and material mechanism.”

⁶² Kant, *Judgement*, 14–6.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 16, 18, 157.

⁶⁴ Kant, *Judgement*, 93, 172n, 31.

⁶⁵ Hume, “Standard of Taste,” 347; Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 150; Burke, *Enquiry*, 16, 11.

⁶⁶ Alphonso Lingis, “The Society of the Friends of Crime,” in *Sade and the Narrative of Transgression*, ed. David Allison, Mark S. Roberts and Allen S. Weiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 112; Pierre Klossowski, “Sade, or the Philosopher-Villain,” *SubStance* 15, no. 2 (1986): 14.

is pointless to attempt to “gêner les impulsions de cette loi universelle.”⁶⁷ The universality of libertine taste is based upon the uniformity of the libertines’ cognitive faculties, the libertine *sensus communis*, as indicated in one libertine’s explanation of “le choc voluptueux de cette lésion sur la masse des nerfs” that he experiences when he commits crime: “je n’en suis pas moins construit comme les autres hommes.”⁶⁸ Sade evidences the universality of crime and the pleasure it produces by repeatedly demonstrating its legitimacy in different countries and time periods: for example, the crime of murder “a été révééré et mis en usage par toute la terre: d’un bout du pôle à l’autre, l’on immole des victimes humaines [...] qu’il n’est point d’action plus simple au monde que le meurtre, qu’il n’en existe aucune qui soit plus légitime.”⁶⁹ Crime’s universality in natural law is placed in contrast with its prohibition in France, demonstrating, according to Sade, the contingency and particularity of cultural laws: “ce qu’on appelle crime en France, cesse de l’être à deux cents lieues de là; qu’il n’est aucune action qui soit réellement considérée comme crime universellement sur la terre; aucune qui, vicieuse ou criminelle ici, ne soit louable et vertueuse à quelques milles de là; que tout est affaire d’opinion, de géographie.”⁷⁰ Cultural laws, which oppose natural laws, feign natural and hence universal status, but “elles ne sont absolument que relatives.”⁷¹ Sade’s strategy of demonstrating the universality of acts deemed criminal by a contingent cultural law coheres with Hume’s contention that cultural and generational differences render a moral norm an impossibility; moral conventions move “in continual flux and revolution.”⁷²

While libertinism attains a universal status in *Juliette*, it is represented as a marginal taste in *Justine*. Justine is told by one libertine that he is never surprised by “la différence des goûts,” and that variance in taste can be traced to variance in cognitive construction: “sa singularité est le résultat de ses organes.”⁷³ Libertinism is also justified through relativism rather than universality in *Les 120 journées de Sodome*, in which the narrating prostitute Duclos states that “tout n’est que relatif à nos mœurs, à nos opinions et à nos préjugés. Ce point établi, il est extrêmement possible qu’une chose parfaitement indifférente en elle-même soit pourtant indigne à vos yeux et très délicate aux miens.”⁷⁴ In transforming pleasure in crime from a particular variation of taste into the

⁶⁷ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 310; Sade, *Juliette* 2, 128; “pleases everyone [...] all men tend towards despotism”; “impede the impulses of this universal law.”

⁶⁸ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 127; “the voluptuous shock of this impact on the mass of nerves”; “I am nonetheless constructed like other men.”

⁶⁹ Sade, *Juliette* 2, 192; “has been revered and put into use by all the earth: from one pole to the other, we immolate human victims [...] there is no simpler action in the world than murder, there exists none more legitimate.”

⁷⁰ Sade, *Justine*, 308; “that which we call crime in France ceases to be so two hundred leagues away; there is no action that is really considered as crime universally on earth; none that, vicious or criminal here, is not praiseworthy and virtuous a few miles away; everything is a matter of opinion, of geography.”

⁷¹ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 29; Sade, *Juliette* 2, 7; “they are but absolutely relative.”

⁷² Hume, “Standard of Taste,” 359.

⁷³ Sade, *Justine*, 200; “the difference in tastes”; “one’s singularity is a result of one’s organs.”

⁷⁴ Sade, *Sodome*, 327; “all is but relative to our customs, to our opinions, and to our prejudices. This point established, it is extremely possible that something perfectly indifferent in itself is however unworthy in your eyes and extremely delicious in mine.”

correct universal standard, *Juliette* marks a significant change in the philosophy of Sadean libertinism, taking the implications of Kant's aesthetic to their extreme conclusions so it is not that "the individual subject becomes the bearer of a universal, ineluctable structure,"⁷⁵ but that subjectivity is entirely erased by this universal structure. When every body bears a uniform cognitive and physiological makeup, any body can admire or participate in crime and derive pleasure from doing so, that is, any body can perform libertine sexual acts. Founded upon a universal standard of judgment and enacted mechanistically by beings without subjectivity, libertine sexual acts in Sade's novels may be performed by potentially anyone.

The principle of universality encompasses the feeling produced by the object: pleasure can be communicated, as Kant puts it, "in a uniform way."⁷⁶ Communication of pleasure is integral to aesthetic judgment as one would "soon grow uneasy with his pleasure, however exquisite, till he had found means to impart it and make it truly pleasant to him by communicating and sharing it at least with some one single person."⁷⁷ In Sade's writing, pleasure finds a universal means of expression through ejaculation, which is enacted uniformly by both genders. Since females ejaculate as copiously and as violently as males—their *liquor genitalis* thought to be akin to semen in Sade's day⁷⁸—its significance is universally valid and intelligible. Ejaculation provides proof of pleasure, illustrated in Juliette's recollection of how Saint-Fond, "pour se convaincre d'une crise que je n'éprouvais que trop réellement, me troussé une main jusqu'au nombril, introduisant de l'autre un de ses doigts dans mon con, qu'il retire inondé des preuves bien certaines de l'agitation luxurieuse."⁷⁹ This universal means of expression also proves cognitive conformity and adherence to a universal standard: Saint-Fond appreciates instances of such evidence because "ils me prouvent à quel point tu partages ma façon de penser!"⁸⁰

Libertine judgment claims adherence to a universal standard, yet it borrows the terminology for its object of admiration and pleasure—"crime"—from the particular and therefore arbitrary source of cultural law, which, therefore, cannot be entirely rejected because libertinism requires its classifications. The libertines frequently repudiate mainstream cultural law only to instate a large number of their own variations, such as the forty-five statutes of the *Société des amis du crime* in *Juliette*, the statutes of the Château de Silling in *Les 120 journées de Sodome*, and those of *Sainte-Marie-des-Bois* in *Justine*. The beauty of crime hinges upon its moral transgression, its deviation from a norm, yet, in framing libertinism as universal, Sade asserts its normality; libertinism "enunciate[s] universals even as it pleads [...] the very special

⁷⁵ Eagleton, *Ideology*, 95.

⁷⁶ Kant, *Judgement*, 167.

⁷⁷ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 221.

⁷⁸ Niklaus Largier, *In Praise of the Whip: A Cultural History of Arousal*, trans. Graham Harman (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 289.

⁷⁹ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 308; "to convince himself of a crisis that I experienced only too genuinely, slid his hand up to my belly button, with the other introducing one of his fingers in my cunt, that he retires inundated with certain proof of my luxurious agitation."

⁸⁰ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 308; "they prove to me to what extent you share my way of thinking!"

cause of abnormality.”⁸¹ Sadean sexuality requires a marginal status because, founded upon moral transgression, “if there is nothing to subvert, no pleasure exists.”⁸²

Cultivation, imagination, excrement

Although judgment is considered instinctive for eighteenth-century aesthetic philosophers, its correct and universal form is not always attained, as Hume and Shaftesbury admit, and is not guaranteed by a response of pleasure, demanding Shaftesbury’s rhetorical question: “cruel spectacles and barbarities are also found to please [...] but is this pleasure right?”⁸³ The assertion of universality is qualified by Kant so that “it does not say that every one *will* agree with my judgment, but that he *ought*.”⁸⁴ Although correct taste may not occur immediately, as Burke flags, it is nonetheless attainable, for, in Shaftesbury’s logic, “if a natural good taste be not already formed in us, why should not we endeavour to form it, and become natural?”⁸⁵ Indeed, attaining “natural good taste” is framed as a crucial moral obligation: if one does not “*learn* to fancy, to admire, to please” correctly, one’s taste will be flippant or perverse, inclined towards the “grotesque and monstrous.”⁸⁶ Correct judgment requires effort to cultivate, as Shaftesbury stresses—“the art itself is severe, the rules rigid”—and its attainment requires “labour and pains,” although a wider scope of legitimacy is allowed by Hume, who, despite asserting a standard of taste, contends that it is “fruitless” to “seek the real beauty, or real deformity” because “each mind perceives a different beauty.”⁸⁷

For the British empiricists, there are several factors thought to influence the cultivation of correct taste. One requires a standard level of physiological and cognitive health, as differences in taste may result from, in Hume’s words, a “defect or perversion” in perception, a defect in sensibility for Hutcheson, or from organs that are simply, as Burke states, “out of order.”⁸⁸ The judging subject must also be free from prejudice so that its judgment is not obscured by “the particular manners and opinions of our age and country,” as Hume maintains, and so that one is not prevented from “pursuing Objects which would please [...] more,” as Hutcheson warns.⁸⁹ Judgment may also be affected by the imagination, which influences the manner and combination in which objects are perceived but does not construct “any thing absolutely new; it can only vary the disposition of those ideas which it has received from the senses.”⁹⁰ Nor does the

⁸¹ Pierre Klossowski, “Nature as Destructive Principle,” in *The 120 Days of Sodom & Other Writings*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 82.

⁸² Timo Airaksinen, *The Philosophy of the Marquis de Sade* (London: Routledge, 1995), 55.

⁸³ Hume, “Standard of Taste,” 348; Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 151.

⁸⁴ Kant, *Judgment*, 94.

⁸⁵ Burke, *Enquiry*, 20; Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 151.

⁸⁶ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 151.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 152, 320; Hume, “Standard of Taste,” 347.

⁸⁸ Hume, “Standard of Taste,” 355; Hutcheson, *Inquiry*, 24; Burke, *Enquiry*, 14.

⁸⁹ Hume, “Standard of Taste,” 357; Hutcheson, *Inquiry*, 64.

⁹⁰ Burke, *Enquiry*, 16.

imagination diversify taste, having “the same power pretty equally over all men.”⁹¹ Other factors that may affect taste include “ignorance, inattention [...] rashness, levity, obstinacy” and a lack of “well-directed exercise.”⁹² Burke suggests that some subjects may have a “greater degree of natural sensibility,” “superior knowledge” of the object, or may pay “closer and longer attention to the object,” a suggestion that is, however, at odds with Burke’s prior declaration that taste remains constant across those “learned and unlearned.”⁹³ Judgment that accords with the universal standard of taste also requires clear perception and conception, a delicate sensibility, and a means of comparison.⁹⁴

In Sade’s novels, similar conditions must be met for the universal standard of taste to be achieved, that is, in order for crime to be perceived as beautiful so that pleasure may be experienced. The libertines must have a healthy disposition, be free from prejudice, and make appropriate use of the imagination, goals that focus their “long course of pedagogical training and self-discipline.”⁹⁵ The libertines acknowledge that adequate perception and judgment is contingent upon “la nature de fluide nerveux”; indeed, if one’s brain operates with “peu de vitesse,” or if neural fluid is turgid, one will not receive pleasure from crime but will desire to act virtuously.⁹⁶ In *Les 120 journées de Sodome*, cognitive inadequacies prevent the harem child Zélamir from sharing the libertines’ appreciation of feces: he is “pas assez formé pour en sentir tout le délicieux, il n’y vit que du dégoût.”⁹⁷ This particular shortcoming is also revealing for Juliette, who contends that it is the simple-minded who cannot savor human excrement, which, when one uses “un peu son imagination,” is “délicieux, c’est absolument la saveur piquante de l’olive.”⁹⁸ Intelligence and “l’extrême finesse des organes” is also vital for appropriate libertine taste, which may be obscured by cultural prejudices as “l’éducation et, après elle, l’habitude, exercent en tel ou tel sens cette portion de sensibilité reçue des mains de la nature.”⁹⁹ Removing prejudice eradicates the prohibiting forces of guilt and shame, throwing “the doors of cruelty wide open,” allowing the “natural good taste” of libertinism to flourish, and inciting pleasure that may be heightened through use of the imagination: “la force de votre imagination vous y fait concevoir des augmentations, des détails ... l’irritation devient plus vive, et vous multiplieriez ainsi, si vous vouliez, vos jouissances à l’infini.”¹⁰⁰ The libertine Clément, echoing Burke, notes that the imagination does not determine the

⁹¹ Ibid., 17.

⁹² Ibid., 26, 24.

⁹³ Ibid., 19, 21, 16.

⁹⁴ Hume, “Standard of Taste,” 355.

⁹⁵ Vila, “Sensibility,” 289.

⁹⁶ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 271; “the nature of neural fluid”; “little speed.”

⁹⁷ Sade, *Sodome*, 237; “not sufficiently developed to appreciate all that is delicious, he does not feel anything but disgust.”

⁹⁸ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 162; “a little of one’s imagination”; “delicious, it has absolutely the biting savor of an olive.”

⁹⁹ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 271; “the extreme delicacy of organs”; “education and, after that, habit, influence in this or that sense this portion of sensibility received from the hands of nature.”

¹⁰⁰ Hénaff, Sade, 101; Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 151; Sade, *Juliette* 2, 39; “the strength of your imagination makes you conceive of ways of increasing [the sensations], the details ... the irritation becomes more intense and in this way, if you would like, you can multiply your pleasures to infinity.”

quality of the object but “n’adopte les objets reçus que de telle ou telle manière, et ne crée ensuite les pensées que d’après les effets produits par le choc des objets aperçus.”¹⁰¹ These principles of cultivation permit access to the universal standard of taste and the libertine repertoire of actions it impels; discouraging deviations in taste, these principles ensure that libertine sexual acts are universally performable.

Eagleton’s remark in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* that the term “aesthetic judgment” is oxymoronic, as it implies that “something can be at once a judgment [...] and yet no more than a feeling,” encapsulates a series of contradictions underscoring the principles of aesthetic judgment.¹⁰² The notion that humans practice a uniform mode of perception is disrupted by the numerous possibilities of difference, highlighted by the measures to be taken by the judging subject to adhere to a universal norm despite in principle dissolving “into some empty, mechanical conformity.”¹⁰³ The requirement of cultivation reveals the failure of universality and its normative imperatives, factors that are betrayed and emphasized in Kant’s qualification that one’s judgment does not guarantee that everyone will agree, “but that he *ought*,” a statement that has invited the observation that “only a principle of taste which is set up as a norm can look beyond the fact of disagreement and still assert the universal, binding validity of any given aesthetic judgment.”¹⁰⁴ Kant’s qualification, his telling use of “ought,” keeps this normativity intact even as the concept of universality fails; the prescriptive implications remain “regardless of what [one’s] response actually was.”¹⁰⁵ This normativity is apparent in the general appeal to a universal and correct standard of taste, which is undermined by Sade’s strategy of applying universality to an object of judgment—crime—that, within the limits of mainstream value systems, clearly cannot claim universal appreciation.

Instinctive morality/instinctive monstrosity

Attaining the universal and correct standard of taste is framed by eighteenth-century aesthetic philosophers as a moral imperative, and it is this moral prescription inherent in the aesthetic that forms the target of Sade’s critique. Sade’s wide-ranging social and political criticism has been well observed by critics, although one point that has not yet been recognized is the way in which Sade uses the principles of aesthetic judgment to critique the ideological prescriptions of these principles. In using libertine sexuality as a vehicle for this critique, Sade was working squarely within the tradition of licentious writing during his time. Emerging in the sixteenth century and developing alongside print culture, pornography was primarily used to criticize and satirize the church and the state by representing public figures in scandalizing depictions of sex acts;

¹⁰¹ Burke, *Enquiry*, 17; Sade, *Justine*, 197; “adopts the received objects only in such or such a manner, and only then creates thoughts according to the effects produced by the shock of glimpsed objects.”

¹⁰² Eagleton, *Ideology*, 93.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 348.

¹⁰⁴ Kant, *Judgment*, 94; Barrows Dunham, *A Study in Kant’s Aesthetics: The Universal Validity of Aesthetic Judgements* (Lancaster: The Science Printing Press, 1934), 125.

¹⁰⁵ Dunham, *Kant’s Aesthetics*, 126.

pornography's capacity to sexually arouse the reader—which has since become the primary and often sole function of contemporary forms—was then an accessory to the imperative of critique.¹⁰⁶ While conducting social critique through the depiction of sexual acts considered perverse was a practice that had gained much popularity by the mid seventeenth century, Sade was, however, unique in focusing aspects of his disdain upon the idea of instinctive morality.

For eighteenth-century aesthetic philosophers, “subjectivism and antirationalism did not mean anarchy or chaos,” but, on the contrary, provided a means to galvanize social harmony and enforce a moral code.¹⁰⁷ As many Enlightenment writers had discredited the aristocracy and Christianity, institutions that had previously dictated moral regulations, it became necessary to develop an independent means of ensuring the moral conduct of the population.¹⁰⁸ This demand was met by the aesthetic as it tied morality to instinct. The principles of aesthetic judgment construe moral knowledge as innate and therefore as immutable and unquestionable; in the aesthetic, moral instinct is “as natural to us as natural affection itself.”¹⁰⁹ The aesthetic-ethical conflation is made by each aesthetic philosopher considered in this chapter, despite attempts by Kant, Burke, and Hume to formally distinguish these realms.¹¹⁰ Kant weaves morality into aesthetics by arguing that moral knowledge, like aesthetic judgment, is instinctive and coheres with *a priori* principles, and by declaring that the judgment of taste is “at bottom a faculty for judging [...] the sensible illustration of moral Ideas.”¹¹¹ When moral knowledge is married to instinct, the former becomes a universal, because an innate, law to which one must conform.¹¹² The nature of one's taste reveals the nature of one's moral values;¹¹³ succeeding or failing at attaining the correct standard of taste reveals whether one is “amiable and agreeable rather than [...] odious and perverse.”¹¹⁴ Interest in natural beauty reveals, Kant maintains, a “good soul” because the “beautiful is the symbol of the morally Good,” while for Shaftesbury, aesthetic pleasure serves “to form a beautiful society” by consolidating harmony, commonweal, and friendship.¹¹⁵ For Hutcheson, aesthetic pleasure impels men to embrace “Reason, Counsel and [the] Good-will of their fellow-Creatures,” while Burke holds that it inspires “sentiments of tenderness and affection.”¹¹⁶ Pleasure also ensures that those who suffer are not left destitute or isolated: according to Burke, “wretchedness, misery and death itself,” in artistic renditions and in lived experience, can become sources of “a very high species of pleasure,” pleasure that,

¹⁰⁶ Lynn Hunt, “Introduction: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800,” in *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800* (New York: Zone Books, 1993), 10.

¹⁰⁷ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation, Volume Two: The Science of Freedom* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1969), 304.

¹⁰⁸ Sabine Roehr, *A Primer on German Enlightenment* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 43.

¹⁰⁹ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 179.

¹¹⁰ Kant, *Judgement*, 51; Burke, *Enquiry*, 112; Hume, “Standard of Taste,” 359.

¹¹¹ Kant, *Judgement*, 9, 255.

¹¹² Eagleton, *Ideology*, 32.

¹¹³ Burke, *Enquiry*, 23.

¹¹⁴ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 151.

¹¹⁵ Kant, *Judgement*, 177, 250–1; Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 243–4.

¹¹⁶ Hutcheson, *Inquiry*, 81; Burke, *Enquiry*, 43.

derived from the pain of others, “arises from love and social affection” and thus strengthens pity and sympathy, the glue of social harmony and moral action.¹¹⁷

Pleasure is also considered to ensure social harmony through its disinterested quality. “Pure disinterested satisfaction,” which is required for an object to be deemed beautiful or universally valid, needs to be divorced from charm and emotion.¹¹⁸ Disinterested pleasure, according to Hutcheson, repudiates self-centeredness and self-advancement, and, as it is derived from beauty that is valued over convenience and use-value, as Hutcheson and Burke both hold, promotes altruism.¹¹⁹ Disinterestedness also promotes personal wellbeing by discouraging the self-interest and “self-passions” that produce misery by leading one to procure pleasure through “all irregularity and extravagance of conduct [...] luxury, riot and debauch” and promoting “horrid and unnatural passions” such as “delight in beholding torments and in viewing distress, calamity, blood, massacre and destruction with a peculiar joy and pleasure [...] a sort of wanton mischievousness and pleasure in what is destructive.”¹²⁰ Shaftesbury’s colorful account of self-interest, interestingly, also describes Sadean libertinism.

Sade does not disentangle an aesthetic-ethical conflation but simply replaces instinctive morality with instinctive immorality. Ethics remain central to Sade’s aesthetic as moral transgression is crucial to the classification of beauty; beauty does not oppose but is concomitant with what Shaftesbury describes as “the foul, the odious, or the despicable,” and the perception of beauty in crime does not render law and civility attractive but requires their rejection.¹²¹ Pleasure derived from the pain of others does not produce sympathy but dissolves it, destroying “the very possibility of the social bond” and driving libertine sex acts that extinguish commonweal, promote violence, and celebrate “private interest over public interest.”¹²² Sadean disinterest—termed “sang-froid” by the libertines—facilitates the moral depravity of libertine sexual acts by allowing the characters to repudiate emotion to perform crime, providing the “clearness of conception” crucial to correct taste.¹²³ Disinterested *sang-froid* may repudiate emotion but it promotes self-interest and desire, facilitating the acts that Shaftesbury decries, which produce happiness and intense pleasure rather than misery. Although Sade draws upon Shaftesbury’s notion that “the cruellest bodily pains do [...] produce [...] the highest bodily pleasure,” he inverts Shaftesbury’s contention that this pleasure opposes “the order and government of the universe” to posit it as adhering perfectly to the universal laws of nature.¹²⁴

This inversion, manifested in the libertines’ sexual acts, that which would now be associated with sadomasochism, supports their declared refusal to accept the moral

¹¹⁷ Burke, *Enquiry*, 44–5, 46.

¹¹⁸ Kant, *Judgment*, 48, 55, 72.

¹¹⁹ Kant, *Judgment*, 47; Hutcheson, *Inquiry*, 24, 25; Burke, *Enquiry*, 91.

¹²⁰ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 216, 221, 225.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 326.

¹²² Hénaff, *Sade*, 101; Pierre Saint-Amand, “The Politics of Crime (Sade),” in *The Laws of Hostility: Politics, Violence, and the Enlightenment*, trans. Jennifer Curtiss Gage (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 143.

¹²³ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 25; Hume, “Standard of Taste,” 355; “sang-froid” translates literally to “cold blood,” but in this context also means “cool composure.”

¹²⁴ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 228, 229.

prescriptions of the aesthetic: Juliette pronounces the notion of a fraternal bond “absurde,” a “lien chimérique,” demonstrating through the pleasure she takes in crime, and in the “labour and pains” it entails, that “il n'existe absolument rien entre un autre homme et votre individu.”¹²⁵ Sade's assertion of the inherently antisocial nature of man mimics that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who, in *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755), argues that natural self-interest translates in society as aggressive selfishness.¹²⁶ Like Rousseau, albeit with an ostensibly opposing value judgment, Sade contends that a fraternal bond, absent in nature, requires fabrication.¹²⁷ Sade attacks the idea of a natural and instinctive fraternity and moral structure by inverting the moral prescriptions of the aesthetic, a dynamic that founds his construction of sexual pleasure and action. Sade's critique extends beyond addressing the ideological basis of instinctive morality to also highlight the conflict posed by the aesthetic to broader Enlightenment theories of subjectivity. The combination of freedom of action and slavery to law involved in Sadean sexuality evokes and problematizes Kant's attempt to fuse autonomous rationality and sensual instinct in his aesthetic exposition.

The law without a law

The notion of instinctive morality is the locus of a tension central to Kant's aesthetic. In the introduction to the *Critique of Judgement*, Kant outlines how the “sensible realm of the concept of nature,” which encompasses instinctive inclinations and sensations, has been previously opposed to the “supersensible realm of the concept of freedom,” which involves rational will.¹²⁸ This divide is bridged, Kant argues, by aesthetic judgment. Because judgment mediates between the faculty of desire, which is ruled by reason and enables freedom, and the faculty of knowledge, which is ruled by the instinct-driven understanding, it will “bring about a transition from the pure faculty of knowledge, the realm of natural concepts, to the realm of the concept of freedom.”¹²⁹ This statement displays Kant's attempt to define man as both morally free and causally determined, an ambition that is also implied in attempts by Shaftesbury and Burke to retain a role for rationality in aesthetic judgment.¹³⁰ These philosophers, I suggest, fail in this aim: the eighteenth-century aesthetic subject has no freedom. The construction of instinctive moral knowledge and virtuous behavior removes ethics from the realm of volition, a point highlighted in the way in which the failure to adhere to the universal

¹²⁵ Sade, *Juliette* 2, 42, “absurd”; “fanciful bond”; “there exists absolutely nothing between another man and your individual self.”

¹²⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009).

¹²⁷ Graeme Garrad, *Counter-Enlightenments: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (London: Routledge, 2006), 21.

¹²⁸ Kant, *Judgement*, 12.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 13, 16.

¹³⁰ Stephan Körner, *Kant* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), 205–6; Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 282; Burke, *Enquiry*, 26.

standard of taste and its moral prescriptions is attributed to the involuntary factors of poor health, the inferiority of cognitive faculties, and the effects of prejudice. The notion that one must learn the correct standard of taste is problematic as conceding to learn involves choice while the goal is framed as instinctive; learning to “become natural,” as Shaftesbury puts it, is counter-intuitive.¹³¹

It has been suggested that Kant’s attempt to bridge the realms of freedom and nature, reason and instinct, “threatens to undermine essential tenets of the first two Critiques.”¹³² The notion of instinctive morality opposes the concept of free moral will, which Kant primarily discusses in his *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) and *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), in which his concept of the categorical imperative is used to argue that man is capable of making moral choices independent of sensual impulse. The categorical imperative entails the idea that man legislates his own moral laws, which are “inextricably bound up with the consciousness of freedom of will, and actually [is] identical with it,” rendering freedom, reason, and morality interchangeable.¹³³ Roehr’s criticism that the categorical imperative subjugates sensibility beneath reason highlights the incompatibility of moral freedom and the aesthetic.¹³⁴ As Roehr notes, “the stress on morality, on individual moral improvement, made sense only if people were morally accountable. And that accountability presupposes some degree of personal choice, or freedom.”¹³⁵ In aesthetic judgment, freedom and autonomy are banished from man’s capacity for moral thought and action. Kant’s notion of the rational and autonomous moral being endowed the subject with dignity,¹³⁶ but in the aesthetic, dignity disappears with free will. This consequence is emphasized in Sade’s novels as libertine sexuality plays out a key formulation that Kant asserts in his attempt to reconcile autonomy and determinism, and, in doing so, demonstrates the failure of this attempt.

For Kant, aesthetic judgment is “productive and spontaneous [...] free and yet of itself conformed to law,” regulated by “the universal laws of the Understanding [...] that] are just as necessary (although arising from spontaneity) as the material laws of motion.”¹³⁷ Judgment, then, is a spontaneous and free process regulated by principle. Kant acknowledges the paradox of this notion by emphasizing it, reiterating the “conformity to law without a law,” the “conformity to law [...] in its *freedom*.”¹³⁸ This paradoxical dynamic comes to bear in Sadean sexuality, which is ruled by natural laws that unlock the scope of human action. Behavioral freedom is a central goal of libertinism, in which one must “donner à tes passions toute l’extension qu’elles peuvent

¹³¹ Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 151.

¹³² Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 16.

¹³³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 42; Roehr, *Enlightenment*, 51.

¹³⁴ Roehr, *Enlightenment*, 89.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹³⁷ Kant, *Judgement*, 96, 26.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 97, 138.

avoir.”¹³⁹ Under nature’s stringent rule, the libertines invent and discover “new pleasures,” putting “unprecedented cycles of possibility into motion.”¹⁴⁰ Nature permits the invention of actions as long as they fall within its spacious juridical parameters: nature “approuve tout, elle légitime tout”; “what is natural, then, is quite simply, everything that could possibly be.”¹⁴¹ The libertines’ behavioral freedom is reflected in the phrasing of Sade’s descriptions: Juliette observes an orgy that encompasses “toutes les manières de foutre, toutes les débauches,” her entourage ensures that “en quinze jours, filles et garçons, tout fut foutu de toutes les manières,” the libertine Cornaro has his buttocks whipped “de toutes les différentes manières possibles,” and in *Les 120 journées de Sodome*, libertine murders “se varient à l’infini.”¹⁴² The libertines’ freedom of action is demonstrated in the spectacular variety of their sexual debauches; these acts represent the “material character of freedom.”¹⁴³

Because their instincts are natural, the libertines are absolved of responsibility and therefore of restrictive guilt, which is illustrated in Olympia’s testimony: “l’idée d’avoir pu ne pas commettre les crimes où je me suis livrée tourmentait quelquefois ma conscience: mes chaînes démontrées, je suis calme, et je poursuivrai sans remords.”¹⁴⁴ Recognition of servitude to nature means that men become “plus libres.”¹⁴⁵ This necessity of action allows their perverse libertine forms to freely proliferate; “la plus grande liberté de penser, de croire et de se conduire” is encapsulated in the freedom driving libertine sex acts.¹⁴⁶ Yet libertine freedom is not unfettered freedom: it is freedom bound within the constraints of the law. Let us revisit Sade’s declaration of nature’s wide-ranging authorization within a revealing passage: it is proclaimed “que les hommes ne sont pas libres, et qu’enchaînés par les lois de la nature, ils sont tous esclaves de ces lois premières, elle approuve tout, elle légitime tout.”¹⁴⁷ It is precisely because the libertines are not free, that they are slaves enchained to nature, that, under nature’s all-approving scope, they have total liberty of action. As in Kant’s conception of aesthetic judgment, the libertines’ cruel sexual acts are “spontaneous [...] free and yet [...] conformed to law,” while the libertines are, as Eagleton describes the subject within Kant’s aesthetics, “simultaneously [...] free subjects and determined objects, slaves in Nature to laws [...] everywhere free and everywhere in chains.”¹⁴⁸ The

¹³⁹ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 210; “give to your passions all the expansion that they can have.”

¹⁴⁰ Hénaff, *Sade*, 77.

¹⁴¹ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 409; David Allison, “Transgression and Its Itinerary,” in *Must We Burn Sade?* ed. Deepak Narang Sawhney (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1999), 215; “approves everything, it legitimates everything.”

¹⁴² Sade, *Juliette* 2, 341, 290, 521; Sade, *Sodome*, 42; “all the ways of fucking, all the debauches”; “in fifteen days, girls and boys, all were fucked in all manners”; “in all the different ways possible”; “vary *ad infinitum*.”

¹⁴³ Le Brun, *Abyss*, 209.

¹⁴⁴ Sade, *Juliette* 2, 77; “the idea of not having committed the crimes in which I indulged sometimes tormented my conscience: my chains demonstrated, I am at peace, and I will continue without remorse.”

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 367; “more free.”

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 332; “the broadest freedom of thought, belief, and action.”

¹⁴⁷ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 409; “that men are not free, and that enchained by the laws of nature, they are all slaves of these essential laws, she approves everything, she legitimates everything.”

¹⁴⁸ Kant, *Judgement*, 96; Eagleton, *Ideology*, 79.

libertines' freedom, which is suggested by their scope of possible actions, is superficial, and ultimately negated by their slavery to law: they are as accountable for their libertine vice as the aesthetic subject is for its moral virtue. The Sadean libertine straddles the boundary between rational freedom and natural determinism, demonstrating the conflict inherent in this dual existence and the hazardous position of the aesthetic in Enlightenment philosophy. This raucous figure demonstrates, with its boundless sexual vice, how the aesthetic threatens to "undercut the very foundations of rationality and moral duty" precisely through its assertion of moral hegemony.¹⁴⁹

Parody/earnestness

Despite its fruitful assertions, Sade's critique suffers from its own tensions, which stem from his disparate use of critical strategies. Sade's promotion of vice is frequently contradicted by the public good that libertinism is said to achieve. Juliette observes that libertinism forges social bonds—"ce n'est pas la vertu qui les lie, c'est le foutre; on plaît à celle qui bande pour nous, on devient l'amie de celle qui nous branle"—and Delbène promotes libertinism on the basis that giving and receiving pleasure promotes "mutuellement tous les secours": "plus elle fout, plus elle fait heureux, et plus elle est utile au bonheur de ses concitoyens."¹⁵⁰ Eschewing marriage to have many sexual partners produces a "universalité" that allows man to "vivre heureux ensemble, et défendre ensemble la patrie."¹⁵¹ This notion echoes Shaftesbury's assertion that sexual "debauch," such as prostitution, promotes fellowship in society as one does not simply receive pleasure but pleasures others, which, however, contradicts his prior claims about the misery induced by such activity.¹⁵² The particular strategy demonstrated in Sade's descriptions of the virtues of libertinism—the ironic depiction of social harmony achieved through practices typically considered during Sade's time to be unharmonious—clashes with Sade's primary strategy of depicting social fragmentation through a framework—the aesthetic—that otherwise prescribes social order.

Sade's promotion of vice over virtue, social fragmentation over social fraternity, utilizes parody; as Phillips states, "it is inconceivable that Sade really intended such a lack of regard for human life to be taken seriously."¹⁵³ Parody is obvious in the libertines' dialogue, such as when Noirceuil compliments Juliette's corruption: "vous faites là un merveilleux usage de l'autorité qui vous est confiée par les lois et par le monarque," and when Saint-Fond claims that "il serait bien fou, l'homme d'État qui ne ferait pas payer

¹⁴⁹ Eagleton, *Ideology*, 103.

¹⁵⁰ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 16, 69, 70; "it is not virtue that bonds [women], it is fucking; we please she who is aroused by us, we become friends with she who masturbates us"; "all mutual aid"; "the more she fucks, the more happiness she creates, and the more she is useful to the happiness of her fellow citizens."

¹⁵¹ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 74; "universality"; "live happily together, and together to defend the motherland."

¹⁵² Shaftesbury, *Characteristics*, 221.

¹⁵³ John Phillips, *The Marquis De Sade: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 57.

ses plaisirs à l'État; et que nous importe la misère des peuples, pourvu que nos passions soient satisfaites?"¹⁵⁴ To discourage a literal interpretation, Sade even goes to the length of using a footnote to inform the reader exactly who these libertines represent: "les voilà, les voilà, ces monstres de l'ancien régime!"¹⁵⁵ Yet parody frequently coincides with instances of earnest commentary, demonstrated when Juliette muses upon "l'insolence et l'effronterie du vice étayé par la richesse et par le crédit" and in Juliette's protracted dialogue with Ferdinand, King of Italy, as she remonstrates against his government's greed, excess and inefficiency.¹⁵⁶ Sade's earnest voice can be heard in the plea of Saint-Fond's victim: "Ô peuple français, quand seras-tu révolté de ces horreurs? quand, las de l'esclavage et pénétré de ta propre force, lèveras-tu la tête au-dessus des chaînes dont les scélérats couronnés t'environnent, et sauras-tu te rendre à la liberté que t'a destinée la nature?"¹⁵⁷ One libertine declares that he despises cultural laws because they breed crime in proscribing it: cultural laws "ne sont qu'inutiles et dangereuses; leur seul objet est de multiplier les crimes ou de les faire commettre en sûreté, par le secret où elles contraignent."¹⁵⁸ These earnest criticisms betray a valorization of virtue, which is reinforced as Sade scorns hypocrisy and selfishness and condemns society's failure to "les exciter à la vertu par des motifs sensibles et réels ... que de les gouverner enfin d'une façon raisonnable," while Juliette responds to the experiences of sorrow, pain and anguish with "quelle horreur! quelle exécution!"¹⁵⁹

While Sade's parodic and earnest writing styles may concern consistent objects of critique—the ideology of instinctive morality and the injustice instated by the *ancien régime*—their haphazard employment breeds narrative contradictions. The libertines both love and loathe crime, denying justice while deeming particular laws and actions unjust.¹⁶⁰ They signify Sade's object of scorn but adhere to natural law, which Sade glorifies; Sade condemns the consequences of a society relinquishing to nature's laws but also idealizes nature, pitting it against a corrupt cultural law. As Welchman states, "it would do a great violence to Sade's work—as well as being almost impossible—to try to make it a consistent philosophical treatise: individual characters enunciate

¹⁵⁴ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 210, 229; "you make a marvellous use of the authority that is entrusted to you by the laws and by the monarchy"; "he would be absolutely mad, the Statesman who does not have his pleasures paid for by the State; and of what importance to us is the misery of the people, provided that our passions are satisfied?"

¹⁵⁵ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 398n; "here they are, here they are, these monsters of the *ancien régime*!"

¹⁵⁶ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 107; Sade, *Juliette* 2, 326–7; "the insolence and effrontery of vice supported by wealth and credibility."

¹⁵⁷ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 343–4; "Oh Frenchmen, when will you be revolted by these horrors? when, weary of slavery and imbued with your own strength, will you lift your head above the chains with which the heinous monarchy surround you, and will you know how to render yourself the liberty that nature destined for you?"

¹⁵⁸ Sade, *Juliette* 2, 127; "are but useless and dangerous; their only objective is to multiply the crimes or have them committed in safety, by the secrecy into which they are forced."

¹⁵⁹ Sade, *Juliette* 1, 57; "excite [men] to virtue by palpable and real motives ... to finally govern them in a reasonable manner"; "what horror! what abomination!"

¹⁶⁰ Beatrice C. Fink, "The Case for a Political System in Sade," in *Sade: His Ethics and Rhetoric*, ed. Colette V. Michael (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 114.

incompatible beliefs.”¹⁶¹ Amongst Sade’s scholarly critics, it is not uncommon to view such contradictions as intentional, even as means to communicate cynicism or to denounce reason and universality.¹⁶² While I agree with Le Brun that one must not equate the contradictions of Sade’s characters with contradictions in Sade’s own social views, it is idolizing to frame Sade’s contradictions as intentional; many of Sade’s inconsistencies stem not from an inconsistent critical viewpoint, but from an inconsistent use of critical strategies, of parody and earnest commentary.

Although this inconsistency produces contradictions in Sade’s narrative, it does not undermine the effectiveness of libertine sexuality as a means of social critique, of using the principles of aesthetic judgment precisely in order to undermine their moral prescriptions. However, the narrative contradictions produced by Sade’s inconsistent use of critical strategies demonstrate that their sexual configurations are only effective in their critique if read as parody, as to take this representation seriously—as one should take the instances of earnest commentary—is to grossly misinterpret Sade’s political values. This highlights the paradoxical core of Sadean sexuality: it is deliberately and consciously constructed as an instinctive and involuntary function in order to fulfill a political agenda. The libertines’ lack of control is a carefully controlled concept; it is not the libertines, but Sade, who wields mastery and command in the severe art of libertine sexuality.

The quality of choice, intentionally spurned by Sade, takes center stage in the form of aesthetic sexuality that emerges in nineteenth-century decadent writing, in which social critique remains imperative. Yet, the aesthetic schema underscoring this construction can be viewed as a reaction to the eighteenth-century aesthetic principles examined here. Rather than adherence to a universal standard of judgment, it promotes a distinctly individualistic form of aesthetic appreciation experienced with the corporeal sensuality and passion spurned by many of the eighteenth-century aesthetic philosophers. Accordingly, this aesthetic schema inspires not so much blatant inversion, as is the case with Sade, but grotesque hyperbole.

¹⁶¹ Alistair Welchman, “Differential Practices,” in *Must We Burn Sade?*, ed. Deepak Narang Sawhney (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1999), 173.

¹⁶² Phillips, *Marquis de Sade*, 58; Le Brun, *Abyss*, 53.

Brutal beauty: Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* and Mirbeau's *Le Jardin des supplices*

Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's aestheticism-inspired short novel *Venus in Furs* (1870) is, in the Anglophone world, undoubtedly the most well known nineteenth-century fictional work on sadomasochism. Yet to consider this book as the definitive aestheticist representation of sadomasochism from this period would be to overlook an arresting literary trend blossoming on both sides of the English Channel before and after the publication of *Venus in Furs*. Several important works of this era—most notably Algernon Charles Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* (1866) and Octave Mirbeau's *Le Jardin des supplices* (1899), in addition to Rachilde's *La Marquise de Sade* (1887) and Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À rebours* (1884)—favor a floral motif in their aestheticist figurations of sadomasochism, or perverse decadent sexuality, which is underscored by strategies of class distinction and social critique. The aestheticist undercurrents of these texts point to a somewhat unlikely model: the tenets of British writer Walter Pater. In addition to propounding key principles of aestheticism, such as the particular relationships between art, life, and social status, form and matter, that would be reflected in the work of Mirbeau and Swinburne, Pater also subtly and earnestly weaves into his aesthetics instances of grotesque torture and murder, and undertones of decadent sexuality. Pater links sadism and aestheticism in a manner that Mirbeau would manipulate with irony, self-consciousness, and extreme hyperbole, and that Swinburne would lyrically anticipate. In doing so, these authors would envision a consciously constructed form of perverse decadent sexuality with a distinctive aesthetic value that works towards the creation of a particular persona and social critique, a mode of aesthetic sexuality that emphasizes both the motives and the fractures of nineteenth-century aestheticism.

Pater on art and life

Although the principles of aestheticism were coming into formation more than ten years before the publication of Pater's *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873),

Pater's well known text offered the first thorough account of aestheticism to an English readership.¹ In and throughout *The Renaissance*, Pater articulates two central tenets of nineteenth-century aestheticism: that art should be valued for its own sake and that lived experience should be treated as art. The central principle of Pater's aestheticism is to privilege the subjective nature of aesthetic apprehension, to consider "what is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*?"² Privileging subjectivity in the appraisal of art produces an affective response in the critic so that aesthetic appreciation is experienced as somatic pleasure: "the aesthetic critic" considers "all works of art, and the fairer forms of nature and human life, as powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations."³ Pater's aestheticist principles, as Johnson suggests, may be termed impressionistic criticism, since it privileges the subject's unique impression of the aesthetic object as well as the affective impression, the "quickened, multiplied consciousness," the aesthetic object produces in the critic.⁴ For Pater, art criticism incorporates not only bodily feeling but calls "upon physical desire as a critical criterion of judgment."⁵ According to Pater, when the aesthetic appreciation of lived experience produces an internal affective response, this experience attains the status of art, becomes valuable for its own sake: "not the fruit of experience, but experience itself is the end."⁶ In addition to external stimuli, one's own affective state, be it "mood or passion or insight or intellectual excitement," can be subjected to aesthetic criticism, as Pater details in the "Conclusion" of *The Renaissance*.⁷ When lived experience becomes art, it attains art's elevated status, wrought through an ideology that insists that "artlessness or philistinism is the antithesis par excellence of aesthetic behaviour [...] the fact that art is somehow better off is simplified into the statement that art is better, full stop."⁸

In *The Renaissance*, Pater locates the value of aesthetic apprehension in its capacity to refine the sheer expanse of stimuli, the "flood of external objects," into a passionate, intense, and beautiful existence, in order to ensure that one's "counted number of pulses" are rich in "depth and variety."⁹ "Intensity and passion" allow one to embrace experience in its fleeting temporality by conferring "the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake" (199). Pater's infamous invitation to "burn always with this hard, gemlike flame" and to seek "exquisite passion" is thus framed as a means of recognizing and responding to life's "awful brevity" (197, 198). Addressing temporality is also cast as the motivation to privilege subjective

¹ R. V. Johnson, *Aestheticism* (London: Methuen, 1969), 38.

² Pater, *Renaissance*, xxvi.

³ *Ibid.*, xxvii.

⁴ Johnson, *Aestheticism*, 31–2; Pater, *Renaissance*, 199.

⁵ Michael F. Davis, "Latent Intelligence and the Conception of Queer Theory," in *Walter Pater: Transparencies of Desire (1880–1920)*, eds. Laurel Brake, Lesley Higgins, and Carolyn Williams (Greensboro: ELT Press, 2002), 279.

⁶ Pater, *Renaissance*, 197.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 342.

⁹ Pater, *Renaissance*, 196, 197, xxvi–ii.

apprehension rather than adhere to an established theory of beauty: “with this sense of the splendour of our experience and of its awful brevity [...] we shall hardly have time to make theories about the things we see and touch” (198). For Pater, experience of life can only be subjective, never objective, because it is mediated by “that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us” (196). Subjective aesthetic appreciation is founded upon the perception of form. “The actual circumstances of an event,” Pater outlines in the *Renaissance* essay “The School of Giorgione,” “should be nothing without the form”: form transforms lived experience into “an end in itself” and thus “should penetrate every part of the matter” (111). For Pater, then, great art means that subject matter is not negated by form but is fused with it, their demarcation destroyed; this fusion produces a pleasurable somatic experience of aesthetic appreciation. The importance of form, or “poetic execution,” is also emphasized by William Michael Rossetti, a key figure within the Art For Art’s Sake movement, in his 1866 appraisal of Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads*.¹⁰ For Rossetti, beauty of form, regardless of subject matter, is the locus of aesthetic appreciation and pleasure, thus the beauty of Swinburne’s form, his “metric eloquence” and “versified rhetoric,” redeems him from the obscenity of his subject matter, transforming matter of “moral repulsiveness” into beautiful art.¹¹ Rossetti’s concept of great art privileges form and ignores matter; matter holds no value for Rossetti as it does for Pater, for whom matter’s union with form achieves the “artistic ideal.”¹² This ideal, Pater argues, can be achieved by “life itself” as it is the “way in which [things] are done”—the form through which experiences materialize—that “gives them a worth in themselves.”¹³ However, Pater’s *Appreciations: With an Essay on Style* contradicts the elevation of form within *The Renaissance* by stipulating that the distinction between great and merely good art rests “not on its form, but on the matter.”¹⁴

“The condition of strangeness”

Contradicting his initial rejection of an abstract theory or “universal formula” of beauty in *The Renaissance*, Pater expounds his own “universal formula” of beauty in the “Postscript” of *Appreciations*: the “addition of strangeness to beauty,” Pater details, defines “the romantic character in art.”¹⁵ This addition is essential: “the romantic spirit” cannot exist unless “the condition of strangeness be first fulfilled,” and when this requisite is met, “very exquisite, very attractive” art can result.¹⁶ While this account contradicts Pater’s earlier repudiation of formulaic beauty, it is consistent with the

¹⁰ William Michael Rossetti, *Swinburne’s Poems and Ballads: A Criticism* (Folcroft: Folcroft Library Editions, 1970), 21.

¹¹ Rossetti, *A Criticism*, 34, 63.

¹² Pater, *Renaissance*, 114.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁴ Walter Pater, *Appreciations: With an Essay on Style* (London: Macmillan, 1890), 36.

¹⁵ Pater, *Renaissance*, xxv; Pater, *Appreciations*, 258.

¹⁶ Pater, *Appreciations*, 259.

value he ascribes within this work to subject matter. By idealizing art in which grotesque matter “may [...] linger, as an additional element of expression, about its ultimate grace,” Pater reasserts his view that in “great art,” matter is not subjugated by, but materializes through, form.¹⁷ Pater’s appreciation of the “addition of strangeness to beauty” is also demonstrated in his criticism, in *The Renaissance*, of the paintings of Leonardo Da Vinci, in which he admires the artist’s “interfusion of the extremes of beauty and terror.”¹⁸ Commenting on *The Medusa of the Uffizi*, Pater suggests that Da Vinci has effectively realized the subject by ensuring that “the fascination of corruption penetrates in every touch its exquisitely finished beauty [...] The hue which violent death always brings with it is in the features.”¹⁹ Reading Pater’s critique of Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* (*La Gioconda*), Dellamora observes that “Pater quietly raises the question of how perversity [...] may be of value in culture.”²⁰ Dellamora uses the term “perversity” solely to indicate same-sex desire, with reference to Da Vinci. Yet this observation may also illuminate that which in Pater’s work is an appreciation of a perversion not tied to a particular sexual object choice, but rather to the aesthetic unification of the beautiful and the morbidly strange, that is, a perversion of aesthetic taste.

Extending this vein of critique in his essay “The Bacchanals of Euripides” (1895), Pater admires the way in which the “subtleties and sophistications” of the Bacchanals encompass their “grotesques,” their “excited, troubled, disturbing” finales that excite “a real shudder at the horror of the theme.”²¹ He details one such finale, describing the death of Pentheus in Euripides’ *The Bacchae*: the king “was fallen upon, like a wild beast, by the mystic huntresses and torn to pieces, his mother being the first to begin ‘the sacred rites of slaughter.’”²² Pater paints his own scene of gruesome sacrifice in his short story *Denys L’Auxerrois* (1887). In this narrative, the protagonist Denys participates in a yearly religious ritual in which he plays the “person of Winter” who is hunted down by the townsfolk. Yet the pretense hunt acquires a real brutality as Denys’ “body, now borne along in front of the crowd, was tossed hither and thither, torn at last limb from limb. The men stuck little shreds of his flesh, or, failing that, of his torn raiment, into their caps; the women lending their long hairpins for the purpose. The monk Hermes sought in vain next day for any remains of the body of his friend. Only, at nightfall, the heart of Denys was brought to him by a stranger, still entire.”²³

¹⁷ Ibid., 260.

¹⁸ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (London: Macmillan and Co., Library ed., 1910), 104. Due to practical constraints, a different edition of *The Renaissance* has been consulted where indicated.

¹⁹ Ibid., 106.

²⁰ Richard Dellamora, “Poetic Perversities of A. C. Swinburne,” in *Masculine Desire: the Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 135.

²¹ Walter Pater, “The Bacchanals of Euripides,” in *Greek Studies: a Series of Essays* (London: Macmillan and Co., Library ed., 1910), 59.

²² Ibid., 76.

²³ Walter Pater, “Denys L’Auxerrois,” in *Imaginary Portraits* (London: Macmillan & Co., Library ed., 1910), 76.

Denys' death has been described as "narcissistically erotic," cohering with a Freudian conception of sadomasochism.²⁴ While Denys' pleasure in or wish for his own death is not particularly evident, the pleasure of the slaughtering mob certainly is. Also suggested in this passage, in the author's meandering elegance, is the aesthetic delight that Pater takes in narrating the grotesque massacre. The circumstances of Denys' death are notable: Denys dons a costume—"the ashen-grey mantle, the rough haircloth about the throat"—to take part in the ritual.²⁵ An accidental scratch on Denys' lip produces a trickle of blood that incites a hungry rage in the pageant revelers; Denys' death takes place when the divisions between art and life are blurred, allowing Pater to assert with literary beauty a scene of grotesque sadism that speaks to art.

In the fictional work *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), Pater links an aesthetic appreciation of the grotesque and the strange directly to the French decadent movement. Marius experiences a fascination that "French writers call the macabre—that species of almost insane pre-occupation with the materialities of our mouldering flesh, that luxury of disgust in gazing on corruption."²⁶ Marius reads with glee a tale "worthy of Théophile Gautier," in which witches "out-race" funeral processions "to ravage the corpse," using their teeth to strip the bodies of their flesh.²⁷ Later, Marius watches a public execution, pondering that "it might be edifying to study minutely the expression of his face, while the assistants corded and pegged him to the bench, cunningly; the servant of the law waiting by, who, after one short cut with his knife, would slip the man's leg from his skin, as neatly as if it were a stocking."²⁸ The scenes of human sacrifice written into Pater's fiction operate on the level of style to illustrate the way in which the grotesque may manifest through beautiful form: the grace of the murder's accomplishment, and the elegance through which the gruesome narrative is executed.

Art, class, and subjectivity

In *The Renaissance*, we recall, Pater positions aestheticism as a means by which to live intensely in the ephemeral present. The aesthetics Pater introduces in *The Renaissance* are developed in *Marius the Epicurean*, which directs a subtle change in the underlying rationale of Pater's aestheticism: the elevated status that experience achieves as it becomes art functions not merely as a response to the brevity of experience, but also its vulgarity. As a strategy of dealing with "human finiteness," aestheticism, as it is outlined in *The Renaissance*, "was not conceived as a form of protest [. . . but] nevertheless, it does represent a detachment from and a contradiction to man's ordinary modes of existence."²⁹

²⁴ Jay Fellows, *Tombs, Despoiled and Haunted: "Under-Textures" and "After-Thoughts" in Walter Pater* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 171.

²⁵ Pater, "Denys L'Auxerrois," 76.

²⁶ Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas*, Vol. 1 (London: Macmillan and Co., Library ed., 1898), 60.

²⁷ Ibid., 61.

²⁸ Ibid., 239.

²⁹ Iser, *Walter Pater*, 32.

A subtle implication in *The Renaissance* that becomes explicit in *Marius*, this detachment has a critical and condescending basis, depicting ordinary society as corrupt and ugly from a position of self-declared superiority. The character Marius subjects experience to aesthetic apprehension, discriminating “select form and colour in things from what was less select” to satisfy his “innate and habitual longing for a world altogether fairer than that he saw.”³⁰ By invoking the ideal of the fair, the pretty and just, Marius suggests a critique that involves both the aesthetic and ethical meanings of this term, condemning his world as ugly and unjust while declaring an ability to beautify this world through selective and refined visual discernment. Marius longs for a fairer society, but because he uses his aestheticism to distance himself from this world, rather than intervene in it, this ideal can be viewed as an expression of Marius’ detached distaste rather than an indication of any democratizing desire. Marius’ aestheticism is fuelled by his desire to distance himself from “the whole pagan world, the depth of the corruption” and to discard “the mere drift and debris of our days.”³¹ Marius’ critical perspective of social life aligns ugliness with immorality, with corrupt and pagan practices, demonstrating that the concern of Paterian aestheticism with beauty and ugliness encompasses the moral deployment of these categories. Aestheticism, as it is developed in *Marius*, implies a critical and elitist response to society.

The subtly distinct agendas underscoring *The Renaissance* and *Marius the Epicurean* can also be discerned in Pater’s discussion of the subjective nature of perception. In *The Renaissance*, this is discussed neutrally as a means of making the most out of the fleeting nature of experience, while in *Marius*, the barrier that subjectivity erects between the self, others, and objective reality is detailed with a condescending tone, subjective perception cherished as a refinement of objective vulgarity. Marius values the “inward world” because it shields him against the “unimproved, unheightened reality of the life of those about him.”³² To declare that the individual is the “standard of all things” is not simply to assert the significance of subjectivity, but to reject common experience and shared values.³³ *The Renaissance*, especially the “Conclusion,” gleams with “a remarkably strenuous hedonism,” which, upon the book’s release, sparked a controversy that led Pater to remove the “Conclusion” from the second edition, published in 1877.³⁴ Yet the unflattering depiction of society implicated within Pater’s aestheticism only becomes explicit in his later writing, evincing an evolving rationale. With this depiction, Pater moves towards a more explicit immorality in his later work, an immorality that contextualizes his appreciation of beauty fused with grotesquerie.³⁵

³⁰ Pater, *Marius* 1, 33, 45.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 33, 45.

³² *Ibid.*, 133.

³³ *Ibid.*, 25.

³⁴ James Eli Adams, “Muscular Aestheticism: Masculine Authority and the Male Body,” in *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 167; Gerald Cornelius Monsman, *Walter Pater* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977), 65.

³⁵ My suggestion directly opposes the traditional interpretation that Pater, responding to the scandal produced by his early writing, tempers his work to remove traces of deviancy and decadence. See, for example, Adams’ argument, in “Muscular Aestheticism,” 150, that Pater replaces his earlier, explicitly immoral articulation of gender transgression with “familiar norms of Victorian masculinity.”

Subjective appreciation, which assists the aesthetic elevation above everyday crassness, shares an equally important role with the expression of this appreciation. The aesthetic apprehension of experience requires creative work and cultivated skill on the part of the perceiver; the art critic labors at the art of aesthetic apprehension and expression, a quest illustrated in Pater's appraisal of the *Mona Lisa* portrait in the *Renaissance* essay "Leonardo Da Vinci." Pater perceives the painting as a study in transhistoric paganism, and in developing this concept he constructs art anew, "executed by the mind's eye of the beholder."³⁶ Highly interpretive and rich in figurative language, Pater's expression of subjective apprehension is marked by a lyrical and literary tone, his criticism forming the basis of "an original prose-poem" that effects his transition from critic to artist, from interpreter of art to aesthetic producer.³⁷ The latter position holds a revered status; Pater's work exemplifies the nineteenth-century idealization of the artist figure, a divergence from the eighteenth-century conception of the artist as simply skilled or creative cultural contributor, be it painter or doctor.³⁸ Pater's treatment of the *Mona Lisa* is used by Wilde to argue that "criticism is itself art [...] the critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticises as the artist does to the visible world of form and colour."³⁹

The relationship between perception and expression is further detailed in *Appreciations*, which states that the creative work involved in subjective apprehension is the basis of the artistry of expression: "for just in proportion as the writer's aim [...] comes to be the transcribing, not of the world, not of mere fact, but of his sense of it, he becomes an artist, his work *fine* art [...] all beauty is in the long run only *fineness* of truth, or what we call expression, the finer accommodation of speech to that vision within."⁴⁰ "Fine" artistic expression exists above the vulgar other it creates, and expression becomes "fine" when it adheres to subjective "sense of fact rather than the fact."⁴¹ Subjective vision, informing language, enables this elevation. Pater articulates the intimate relationship of subjective perception and expression through the voice of Marius: "virile apprehension of the true nature of things, of the true nature of one's own impression, first of all!—words would follow that naturally, a true understanding of one's self being ever the first condition of genuine style."⁴² Because subjectivity guides aesthetic apprehension and the transformation of life into art, apprehension also reveals the nature of subjectivity, so that one's impression of experience also constitutes "the impression of the individual in his isolation."⁴³ In *Marius*, Pater views aesthetic perception as enabled by subjectivity but also as constructing it: "if the true value of souls is in proportion to what they can admire, Marius was just then an acceptable

³⁶ Pater, *Renaissance*, 103; Iser, *Walter Pater*, 44.

³⁷ Johnson, *Aestheticism*, 83.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁹ Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," in *Poems and Essays* (London: Collins, 1956), 304.

⁴⁰ Pater, *Appreciations*, 6.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Pater, *Marius* 1, 155.

⁴³ Pater, *Renaissance*, 196.

soul.”⁴⁴ Marius equates perceiving something with “*being* something,” demonstrating that, for Pater, expression externalizes subjectivity; style “gives form to subjective reality.”⁴⁵ Subjectivity also garners the fine status claimed by the art perceived and expressed through it. Pater defends the adage “the style is the man” from charges of superficiality, arguing that “the style, the manner, would be the man, not in his unreasoned and really uncharacteristic caprices, involuntary or affected, but in absolutely sincere apprehension of what is most real to him.”⁴⁶

However, Pater’s exposition of subjectivity externalized through expression grates with the political motive of his aestheticism, its function to condemn society as aesthetically and morally ugly and dissociate the self from this social sphere. Pater argues that aesthetic apprehension reveals and externalizes a genuine self, yet because subjective apprehension is motivated by a particular aim, it is intentionally and carefully cultivated. The aestheticist’s mode of apprehension remains distinctively subjective rather than objective, but it does not reflect subjective apprehension, and hence subjectivity, in a genuine and unmediated form, one’s actual and immediate experience. Rather, it reveals apprehension that is consciously guided towards particular ends, rendering problematic appeals to unreasoned and involuntary expressions of subjectivity. This deliberate and contrived cultivation of particular modes of discrimination and subjectivity is fundamental to the way in which traces of Paterian aestheticism surface in the work of Mirbeau and Swinburne, and the resulting constitution of perverse decadent sexuality.

Pater and Mirbeau: cross-Channel appreciations?

The active engagement between British and French writers during the final two decades of the nineteenth century is frequently considered in terms of France’s influence upon British literature.⁴⁷ The impact of English aestheticism upon French decadent writing is much less marked, but may be exemplified by the case of Pater’s work. Although Pater was not particularly well known in France before the early twentieth century, he was nevertheless “a major English influence on the growing obsession with death and decay which marked the end of the century both in Britain and France.”⁴⁸ Pater’s work, including his *Imaginary Portraits* and the chapter on Leonardo Da Vinci from *The Renaissance*, had been translated for French readers since the 1890s.⁴⁹ *The Renaissance*

⁴⁴ Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas*, Vol. 2 (London: Macmillan and Co., Library ed., 1898), 97.

⁴⁵ Pater, *Marius* 1, 218; Iser, *Walter Pater*, 47.

⁴⁶ Pater, *Appreciations*, 34.

⁴⁷ David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 65.

⁴⁸ Emily Eells, “‘Influence Occulte’: The Reception of Pater’s Works in France before 1922,” in *The Reception of Walter Pater in Europe*, ed. Stephen Bann (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004), 87; Murray Pittock, *Spectrum of Decadence: the Literature of the 1890s* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 22.

⁴⁹ Eells, “Influence Occulte,” 89; Stephen Bann, “Pater’s Reception in France: a Provisional Account,” in *Walter Pater: Transparencies of Desire*, ed. Laurel Brake, Leslie Higgins, and Carolyn Williams (Greensboro: ELT Press, 2002), 60; Eells, “Influence Occulte,” 87–91.

aroused “l’admiration et l’enthousiasme de toute une génération d’écrivains” in France as well as in the United Kingdom and Germany.⁵⁰ Although there exists no direct evidence that Mirbeau had read Pater, it is extremely possible that he was, at least, aware of Pater’s work. In Oxford, 1894, Pater had met with Mirbeau’s close friend Stéphane Mallarmé and acquaintance Paul Bourget, both of whom held the English writer’s oeuvre in great esteem; Mallarmé, for example, declared Pater “le prosateur ouvrier par excellence de ce temps.”⁵¹ Pater’s aestheticism offers a productive and revealing lens through which to examine *Le Jardin des supplices* as it clearly details the methods through which one may treat life as art, illuminating the aestheticist strategies of Mirbeau’s *femme fatale*. Although I do not claim that Mirbeau consciously integrated Pater’s theory into his novel, I do suggest that *Le Jardin des supplices*, whether or not by intention, displays the aestheticist principles formally espoused by Pater, and that analyzing this relationship deepens our understanding of both Pater’s and Mirbeau’s work. Such an analysis demonstrates, for example, that *Le Jardin des supplices* deploys the principles of Pater’s aestheticism in a highly exaggerated and ironic manner. Pater’s expositions on art, as well as his fiction, encompass a subtle invocation of sexuality, deviance, corporeality, and violence—perhaps partly a result of Pater’s admiration for French decadent writers such as Théophile Gautier—that is exploited with tongue-in-cheek animation by Mirbeau. That which is relatively subtle and always earnest in Pater’s writing becomes extreme and burlesque in Mirbeau’s novel. It has been noted that Pater’s “austere aestheticism” can be “extended and distorted into [...] decadent posturing and self-conscious immorality,”⁵² and this is precisely what *Le Jardin des supplices* achieves, suggesting that English aestheticism, whilst to some extent informed by French decadence, was also appropriated and perverted by it.

Exquisite execution in *Le Jardin des supplices*

Octave Mirbeau may have been most well known as a political journalist, but he was also a successful novelist, playwright, and art critic who championed the avant-garde. He was passionately involved in the Dreyfus affair—the unjust imprisonment of Alfred Dreyfus in 1894 on charges of treason, and the ensuing fallout—and remained so in 1899, the year that *Le Jardin des supplices* was published. The influence of the Dreyfus affair can be clearly observed in the novel’s caustic tone, and the preface, or “Frontispice,” immediately introduces the novel as a critique of corruption within the French political system.⁵³ The first part of the novel details the narrator’s deceitful political career and the social and physical violence he encounters and perpetuates. Whilst voyaging by

⁵⁰ Martine Lambert-Charbonnier, *Walter Pater et les “portraits imaginaires”: miroirs de la culture et images de soi* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2004), 8; “admiration and enthusiasm from an entire generation of writers.”

⁵¹ Eells, “Influence Occulte,” 90; Stéphane Mallarmé, quoted in Pittock, *Spectrum of Decadence*, 25; “the quintessential finely-crafted prose writer of these times.”

⁵² Weir, *Decadence*, 68.

⁵³ Octave Mirbeau, *Le Jardin des supplices* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 43; “Frontispice.”

ship he meets and becomes enraptured with the beautiful Englishwoman Clara, and decides to pursue her rather than his fabricated diplomatic assignment. The second part sees the narrator paying Clara another visit in China, where she takes him to see her beloved garden. The brutal and ugly homicides organized by the French state, described in the first part, are exchanged for the apparently artistic tortures meted out in the exotic garden. Clara's aestheticism departs dramatically from Mirbeau's own ideals of art criticism: contrary to Clara's insistent anti-utilitarianism, Mirbeau believed that great art has pedagogic value, that it teaches its audience something about the truth of human existence.⁵⁴ In contrast to the aestheticist notion that art exists above and beyond the quotidian, Mirbeau's art appreciation "was invariably anchored to social realities."⁵⁵ But if Clara's aesthetic values differ from Mirbeau's, it is because her response to what she considers to be art adheres—albeit in a distinctly exaggerated, ironic, and perverted manner—to that of Pater.

With her refined talent for aesthetic appreciation, Clara perceives as art the torture meted out in *Le jardin des supplices*. Clara declares torture's status as art to her French lover, the novel's nameless narrator, thereby affirming her own position as critic: "je n'ai rien vu de si beau [...] que ces forçats chinois."⁵⁶ The notion that Clara's sadistic pleasure is derived from the beauty of torture becomes explicit in the comments her lover makes when he acquiesces to accompany her to the garden—"puisque c'est si beau, ma chère Clara ... et que cela vous fait tant de plaisir"—and is echoed in Clara's own words: "oh! tu vas voir, tout à l'heure, comme c'est beau! [...] Et quels extraordinaires ... quels inconnus ... quels merveilleux désirs cela vous fait entrer dans la chair!" (164).⁵⁷ Clara adheres to Pater's formula of focusing on the formal elements of lived experience by discerning the artistry in the composition of the torture she views. Her discrimination and enjoyment of the formal elements of torture are illustrated by her recollection of torture enjoyed in the past. Texture and tone are the first qualities she recounts—"l'homme avait le dos et les reins nus ... un dos et des reins comme du vieil or!"—before she notes the intensity of color, sequential cohesion, heightened tension, and the aural effects of the torture scene: "quand la badine était rouge, le soldat fouettait l'homme à tour de bras, sur les reins ... La badine faisait: chuint! Dans l'air ... et elle pénétrait, très avant, dans les muscles qui grésillaient et d'où s'élevait une petite vapeur roussâtre ... comprends-tu?" (165).⁵⁸ Clara's final comment announces the complexity of the torture and her own advanced skills in perception and interpretation. Her

⁵⁴ Cristina Ferree Chabrier, "Aesthetic Perversion: Octave Mirbeau's *Le Jardin des supplices*," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 34, no. 3/4 (2006): 365.

⁵⁵ Reg Carr, *Anarchism in France: The Case of Octave Mirbeau* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1977), 95.

⁵⁶ Mirbeau, *Jardin*, 149; "I've seen nothing so beautiful [...] as these Chinese convicts."

⁵⁷ "Since it's so beautiful, my dear Clara [...] and that it gives you so much pleasure"; "oh! You'll see later how beautiful it is! [...] And what extraordinary ... what unknown ... what marvellous desires it will thrust into your flesh!"

⁵⁸ "The man had a bare back and loins ... a back and loins like old gold!"; "when the cane was red, the soldier whipped the man with extreme force upon his kidneys ... The cane went chuint! in the air ... and it penetrated, very deeply, into the man's muscles that sizzled and from which rose a thin reddish steam ... do you understand?"

commentary is instructive, teaching her ignorant lover how to aesthetically appraise this scene of excruciating violence: one must ignore the victim's experience of torture, and thus exclude the possibility of empathy, in order to focus on the way in which the torture is meted out. Clara recounts the technical and conceptual mastery of the torture's dramatic climax: "alors, le soldat laissait refroidir la badine dans les chairs qui se boursouflaient et se refermaient ... puis, lorsqu'elle était froide, il l'arrachait violemment, d'un seul coup ... avec de menus lambeaux saignants ... Et l'homme poussait d'affreux cris de douleur" (165).⁵⁹ Emphasis is created through repetition: "puis le soldat recommençait ... Il recommença quinze fois!"⁶⁰ It is the formal element of repetition that fuels Clara's pleasure, as she indicates to her lover: "et à moi, aussi, chère petite âme, il me semblait que la badine entraînait, à chaque coup, dans mes reins ... C'était atroce et très doux!" (165).⁶¹ Her verbal repetition of "c'était atroce et très doux" (166)—which mimics the torturer's use of repetition—underlines the causal relationship between torture's form and her sadistic pleasure. This utterance also illuminates the paradoxical nature of sadistic pleasure: its basis in the juxtaposition of the grotesque and the beautiful is reiterated in the juxtaposition of "atroce" and "doux."⁶² The adjective "doux" encompasses the dynamics of aesthetic pleasure, indicating here, as it does elsewhere in *Le Jardin des supplices*, both aesthetic beauty and sexual pleasure, in which the latter is sourced from the former. As the narrator observes Clara's eyes rolling skyward, it is clear that it is her ability to perceive beautiful form in torture—which hinges upon Pater's instruction to attend to the form through which matter materializes, through which actions are enacted—that brings her close to orgasm. *Le Jardin des supplices* also exemplifies the observation that "decadent art's primary imagery draws from the ugly and obscene"; in this instance, the obscenity of torture is not eliminated through form but is, on the contrary, intensified in its ironic contrast with formal beauty.⁶³ Matter materializes through form and thus conforms to Pater's conception of the "artistic ideal" in which form "penetrate[s] every part of the matter," producing exquisite art that invites a pleasurable somatic response.⁶⁴ That the pleasure Clara derives from torture's apparently beautiful execution is a distinctly Paterian form of "exquisite passion" is suggested as she fondly recollects watching a woman masturbate her victim to death, the blood splashing across the torturer's face matching the hue of her ruby ring, which "allait et venait dans le soleil, comme une petite flamme rouge et dansante."⁶⁵ This flame-like gem, in perversely evoking Pater's "gemlike flame," calls attention to the form with which things are done and thus illuminates the source of

⁵⁹ "So, the soldier let the cane cool down inside the man's flesh which swelled up and closed over ... then, when it was cold, he tore it out violently in one stroke ... along with tiny bloody shreds ... And the man howled dreadful screams of pain."

⁶⁰ "Then the soldier restarted ... He restarted fifteen times!"

⁶¹ "And for me, too, dear little soul, it seemed to me that the rod entered, at each stroke, into my loins ... It was atrocious and very sweet!"

⁶² "Atrocious"; "sweet."

⁶³ Peter Michelson, *Speaking the Unspeakable: a Poetics of Obscenity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 77.

⁶⁴ Pater, *Renaissance*, 111.

⁶⁵ Mirbeau, *Jardin*, 167; "went back and forth in the sun, like a little red and dancing flame."

Clara's corporeal enthusiasm.⁶⁶ This imagery also emphasizes Mirbeau's method of engaging with Paterian aestheticism: through grotesque exaggeration, a strategy that slyly and mockingly points to the sexual decadence and admiration for sensory excess cloaked beneath aestheticism's sobriety. Yet this tongue-in-cheek hyperbole, this irreverence for aestheticism's elusive transgressions, does not threaten the respect for Pater's aestheticist principles suggested throughout Mirbeau's novel.

The aesthetic status of torture is also reinforced by its association with the novel's principal aesthetic reference, the flowers. Mirbeau's description of torture imitates his description of the flowers, both forms endowed with aesthetic status through the style and detail of their representation. The emphasis on detail, a central characteristic of decadent form, galvanizes links with the aesthetic by invoking ornamental semantics.⁶⁷ Mirbeau details the color, tone, shape, texture, and composition of the flowers, their transmutation from natural form to cultural artefact culminating in their semblance with human language: "Les iris dressaient hors de l'eau leurs longues tiges portant des fleurs extraordinaires, aux pétales colorés comme les vieux vases de grès; précieux émaux violacés avec des couleurs de sang; pourpres sinistres, bleus flammés d'ocre orangée, noirs de velours, avec des gorges de soufre . . . Quelques-uns, immenses et crispés, ressemblaient à des caractères kabbalistiques."⁶⁸ This detailed description of form is also evinced in Mirbeau's treatment of tortured convicts, which immediately precedes that of the flowers:

Une autre femme, dans une autre niche, les jambes écartées, ou plutôt écartelées, avait le cou et les bras dans des colliers de fer . . . Ses paupières, ses narines, ses lèvres, ses parties sexuelles était frottées de poivre rouge et deux écrous lui écrasaient la pointe des seins . . . Plus loin, un jeune homme était pendu au moyen d'une corde passée sous ses aisselles; un gros bloc de pierre lui pesait aux épaules et l'on entendait le craquement des jointures . . . Un autre encore, le buste renversé, maintenu un équilibre par un fil d'archal qui reliait le cou aux deux orteils, était accroupi avec des pierres pointues et tranchantes entre les plis des jarrets. (244)⁶⁹

The portrayal of the torture victims, like that of the flowers, addresses composition and arrangement, the bodies angled and contorted with precision, rigorously trained and

⁶⁶ Pater, *Renaissance*, 197.

⁶⁷ Naomi Schor, *Reading In Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 43, 4.

⁶⁸ Mirbeau, *Jardin*, 244; "Irises rose out of the water, their long stems bearing extraordinary flowers, with petals colored like old stoneware vases; precious purplish enamels with blood colors; sinister crimsons, blues blazed with orangey ocher, velvet blacks with sulfur throats . . . Some of them, immense and contorted, resembled Kabbalistic letters."

⁶⁹ "Another woman, in another recess, her legs spread, or rather cleaved apart, had her neck and arms in iron collars . . . Her eyelids, her nostrils, her lips, and her sexual parts had been rubbed with red pepper and two metal nuts crushed her nipples . . . Further away, a young man had been hung by a rope suspended beneath his armpits; a large block of stone weighed down upon his shoulders and his joints could be heard cracking . . . Another still, his chest bent back, his balance maintained by a brass wire that bound his neck to two toes, was squatting with pointy, sharp stones between the folds behind his knees."

constrained like cultivated plants, gnarled and twisted like bonsai shrubs. The passage disregards the victims' pain, focusing solely on their painstaking aesthetic arrangement and the visual impression this creates. The aesthetic emphasis of Mirbeau's prose exemplified in this passage is apparent across the text as "time, plot, psychology, and development, fade in favor of a series of tableaux that describe the minutiae of the tortures and the disposition of flowers in the garden."⁷⁰

Clara, a most discerning critic of torture and flora, often displays a sharp resemblance to Mary Barbe, the protagonist of Rachilde's *La Marquise de Sade*. Mirbeau admired Rachilde; in 1891, he wrote to the novelist to congratulate her on her latest book *La Sanglante Ironie*, telling Rachilde that "personne ne vous a rendu la justice que vous méritez. On vous reproche, un peu, le simple, le lâché de votre style. Je trouve, moi, bien au contraire, que vous avez souvent, et par le style, atteint à la perfection de l'art."⁷¹ The two authors used similar strategies in styling the popular *femme fatale* trope as notably sadistic. Dubbed the "queen of the decadents" and "Madame Baudelaire," Rachilde—the pen name of Marguerite Eymery—was a major figure within the French symbolist and decadent movements, infamous for her fourth novel *Monsieur Vénus* (1884) as well as her tendency to sport masculine clothing. *La Marquise de Sade* was the ninth of more than sixty works Rachilde published between 1880 and 1947. The novel follows Mary's miserable childhood to her vengeful early adulthood, in which she uses her considerable powers of seduction to sadistically torment various male lovers. While Clara appreciates the torture performed by dedicated professionals, Mary takes pleasure in the beauty of the torture and suffering she metes out herself. The aesthetic pleasures of blood provide Mary with a particular delight, and the perceived beauty of blood is articulated through the flower trope, which proves to be a major figurative strategy within the more sadomasochistic texts of the nineteenth century. Mary especially enjoys the nosebleeds of her lover Paul, induced by his masochistic longing for her. The aesthetic quality of Paul's blood is suggested through the association of the rose-garden setting; Mary's excavation of roses serves as a metaphor for her extraction of Paul's blood.⁷² Her mocking jest indicates that her sadistic humiliation of Paul is motivated by the aesthetics of his suffering: "tu es si drôle avec ton beau sang toujours prêt à jaillir et qui est d'un si beau rouge!"⁷³ Here, the aesthetic operates as a displacement of power dynamics; aesthetic sensibility is a coded form of authority.

⁷⁰ Lawrence R. Schehr, "Mirbeau's Ultraviolence," *SubStance* 86, no. 27 (1998): 110.

⁷¹ Octave Mirbeau, Pierre Michel, and Jean-François Nivet, *Octave Mirbeau: Correspondance Générale*, tome deuxième (Lousanne, Suisse: L'Âge d'Homme, 2005), 368; "no one has given you the justice you deserve. You're reproached, a little, for the simplicity, the clumsiness, of your style. I find, on the contrary, that you have often, and by your style, achieved the perfection of art."

⁷² Rachilde, *La Marquise de Sade* (Paris: Librairie Française, Alphonse Piaget, 1888), 291.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 207; "you are so funny with your fine blood always ready to gush out, and it's such a beautiful red!"

Monstrosity and aristocracy

Discriminating beautiful form in grotesque torture marks Clara's subjectivity as belonging distinctly outside the norm. The union she perceives between the opposed signs of beauty and grotesquerie represents an intentional deviation from, and a disparagement of, traditional aesthetic norms—that torture should be viewed as ugly rather than beautiful—as well as moral conventions: that one should express disgust, pity, or sympathy for the victims' suffering rather than aesthetic appreciation. Clara brands herself a monster, as her lover contemptuously observes, yet her monstrosity is positioned not as inferior but as superior to the norm from which it deviates, in accordance with the hierarchy implied in Pater's dissociation from society.⁷⁴ The valuing subject is defined according to the valued object: "isn't it/aren't I wonderful?"⁷⁵ That Clara takes the nature of the art she appreciates to reflect upon her own self is evident in her retort to her lover that "je n'ai pas l'âme de ton affreuse Europe . . . Je porte, en moi, l'âme de la vieille Chine, qui est bien plus belle."⁷⁶ The elitism of aesthetic torture and the pleasure it incites is reinforced through the use of rare and expensive commodities. Clara feeds the tortured convicts with a pitchfork of jade and gold-encrusted platinum whilst spectators at the garden may enjoy tea, delicate desserts, and music and poetry recitals (153, 161). Of course, it is the garden itself, stage to the much-admired tortures, that endows Clara's sadistic subjectivity with a distinct superiority. *Le Jardin des supplices* draws upon the elitist connotations harvested by flower cultivation in seventeenth-century France. During this time, collecting and cultivating flowers, a practice popular with the nobility and royalty, became an important means of displaying refined taste and an aristocratic status, resulting in a fashion amongst the elite for elaborate flower gardens; indeed, flower collecting had garnered such cultural capital that Louis XIV made the cultivation of his flower garden, and his reputation as a floriculturist, a key priority.⁷⁷ In *Le Jardin des supplices*, the rarefied and cultivated flowers that surround the tortured bodies lend the objects of Clara's admiration—and thus also her aesthetic pleasure, her sexual pleasure—a distinct aristocratic elitism, which is affirmed through the construction of a low and vulgar other. The juxtaposition of repulsive torture with practices and objects typically considered beautiful and refined reveals the deliberateness of this arrangement, the union of aesthetically opposed signs an intellectual and reflexive exercise that reinforces the elitism suggested in the provocative use of exclusive commodities.

A similar strategy can be observed in *La Marquise de Sade*. Like the torture that Clara perceives with pleasure, Mary's "supplices très mignons"—a description that reiterates the oxymoronic character of perverse sexuality in nineteenth-century

⁷⁴ Mirbeau, *Jardin*, 152.

⁷⁵ Tony Bennett, *Outside Literature*, 165.

⁷⁶ Mirbeau, *Jardin*, 152; "I don't have the soul of your atrocious Europe . . . I bear, within me, the soul of old China, which is much more beautiful."

⁷⁷ Elizabeth Hyde, *Cultivated Power: flowers, culture, and politics in the reign of Louis XIV* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 80, 96.

decadent literature—are visually pleasing and performed with a refined sense of artistry.⁷⁸ Mary experiences “plaisir charmant” when she creates delicate spots of blood—“une perle empourprée”—by dragging her nails across Paul’s skin (355, 255).⁷⁹ Later, Mary anticipates the “idéale volupté” to be gained by “un fin projet” of murder that involves enticing tranvestites into her home, offering them her finest wine, and adorning them in jewels and lace before tying them with satin ribbons to an antique bed and piercing them with red hot needles (384).⁸⁰ The refinement of Mary’s torture methods and her use of rarefied commodities contribute to an elitist form of sadistic subjectivity corresponding with that which is detailed in Mirbeau’s later novel.

Theory and artifice

Clara’s deliberate articulation of self, and her strict adherence to a Paterian theory of beauty in the “addition of strangeness to beauty” she admires, betrays the purpose and artifice of her aesthetic appraisal. While clearly subjective in its refusal of dominant or common modes of perception, Clara’s appraisal of torture is not founded upon the “true nature of one’s own impression”; rather, she employs an established aesthetic tradition in order to distance herself from the bourgeois sphere.⁸¹ This highlights the tension that Pater’s theory of beauty bears with his refusal of aesthetic formulas, and also with his position in *The Renaissance*, which persists in *Marius*, that aesthetic apprehension demands a “true understanding of one’s self” and reveals the genuine nature of this self.⁸² The particular agenda and deliberate strategy of this kind of subjective apprehension negates the possibility that it registers the “true value of souls”; perceiving beauty in the strange and grotesque reveals artificial rather than genuine apprehension.⁸³ This inconsistency reflects that which Adams observes in the “Winckelmann” essay of *The Renaissance*: that “the development of art marks an intensification of, rather than an escape from, self-consciousness,” one of the “tensions that centrally structure Paterian self-fashioning.”⁸⁴ The contrived nature of the “aesthetic theory of the Horrid and the Terrible,” certainly an apt description of Clara’s deployment of Paterian principles, is noted by Mario Praz, who, in tracing its history from the Renaissance, remarks that “what was often, in the seventeenth-century writers, a mere intellectual pose, became, in the Romantics, a pose of sensibility,” motivated by the desire “simply to astonish.”⁸⁵ When aesthetic apprehension colonized lived experience, Praz details, it became fashionable to “affect a real, genuine taste for such

⁷⁸ Rachilde, *Marquise de Sade*, 354; “very sweet tortures.”

⁷⁹ “Charming pleasure”; “a crimson pearl.”

⁸⁰ “Perfect voluptuousness”; “a refined project.”

⁸¹ Pater *Marius* 1, 155.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 97.

⁸⁴ Adams, *Male Body*, 65, 64.

⁸⁵ Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. Davidson Angus (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 27, 38.

beauty as was threatened with disease or actually decaying.”⁸⁶ Praz’s review of this aesthetic emphasizes that, in contrast with Pater’s exposition in *The Renaissance*, the desire to treat art as life “is not so much fidelity to an inner self as it is the presentation of that self to ‘the world.’”⁸⁷

The artificiality and self-consciousness of Clara’s aesthetic perception of torture is also suggested in the hyperbole and irony saturating Mirbeau’s prose, perhaps most clearly demonstrated in the cries of the torture garden’s meat vendors: “Et regardez! ... et choisissez! ... Nulle part vous n’en trouverez de meilleure ... Il n’y en a pas de plus corrompue.”⁸⁸ This conscious and conspicuous inversion of aesthetic norms is echoed in Clara’s response, both verbal—“oh! le beau ... beau morceau!”—and physical: “elle humait la pourriture, avec délices, comme un parfum [...] on eût dit qu’elle éprouvait une jouissance d’amour” (159).⁸⁹ Such passages clearly demonstrate how Mirbeau’s novel amplifies Paterian self-consciousness into extreme hyperbole and irony, literary devices that alienate a bourgeois realm that is not expected to deviate from a literal and naïve reading.⁹⁰ The hyperbolic and ironic tone with which Mirbeau beautifies the grotesque confirms the agenda invested in perverse decadent pleasure: to disrupt Victorian moral, aesthetic, and sexual sensibilities from the perspective of a disdainful elitism.

However, neither intrinsic nor universally acknowledged, this elite status is valid only to the perverse sexual subject it is claimed by, who relies upon acknowledgment by the social strata it seeks to transcend. The pervert’s intentional deviation from aesthetic and moral norms requires, and hence acknowledges and authorizes, those norms as a point of reference. The perverse art critic relies upon the category of the aesthetic to expunge itself from the bourgeois realm, but this category is “a bourgeois concept in the most literal historical sense.”⁹¹ A similar discord is echoed within the aestheticist framework that founds the pervert’s opposition: Pater treats life as art to transcend the banality of life, and thus art is precariously positioned as both “synonymous with life and opposed to it.”⁹² Furthermore, the supposed opposition of art to society is a social and historical product rather than a natural and timeless relation as it is purported; this opposition—a form of rigorous critical work or “ideological labour”—also undermines claims of art’s uselessness.⁹³ If there is any movement guilty of revering art as a transhistorical phenomenon detached from society and its modes of labor, production, and power, it is that of Art for Art’s Sake.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 40.

⁸⁷ Adams, *Male Body*, 167.

⁸⁸ Mirbeau, *Jardin*, 157; “And look! ... and choose! Nowhere will you find anything better ... there’s not anything more rotten.”

⁸⁹ “Oh! the beautiful ... beautiful piece!”; “she inhaled the putrefaction with delight, as if it were perfume [...] it seemed as though she experienced sensual pleasure.”

⁹⁰ Rita Felski, “The Counterdiscourse of the Feminine in Three Texts by Wilde, Huysmans, and Sacher-Masoch,” *PMLA* 106, no. 5 (1991): 1100.

⁹¹ Eagleton, *Ideology*, 8.

⁹² Sayed Hassan Shoukry, *The Victorian Taste: A Study of the Critical and Aesthetic Theories in the Victorian Period* (Riyad, Saudi Arabia: Riyad University Press, 1979), 128.

⁹³ Richard Terdman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 339, 309.

Voluptuous botany

In addition to characterizing torture and flowers, artificiality also defines a third aesthetic object constructed in *Le Jardin des supplices*: Clara's somatic expression of aesthetic appreciation, the "exquisite passion" of perverse decadent pleasure.⁹⁴ This reading emphasizes an overlooked connotation of Pater's oft-quoted bid to "burn always with this hard, gemlike flame," through which Pater denotes the crystallization of passion, corporeal affect, into material form, "gemlike" signifying its aesthetic quality.⁹⁵ The aesthetic quality of Clara's pleasure is indicated through an instrumental and extensive use of flower tropes. It is likely that the floral imagery of *Le Jardin des supplices* is primarily indebted to that of Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À rebours*, published fifteen years before Mirbeau's novel. Mirbeau and Huysmans met for the first time in 1877, although their acquaintance was not amicable; indeed, their mutual contact Léon Daudet claimed that they detested each other "par dissemblance de tempérament, comme chien et chat."⁹⁶ Although Mirbeau may not have appreciated Huysmans' personality, *Le Jardin des supplices* suggests that he found merit in Huysmans' suggestive use of flower metaphors. The form and function of the flower figure in *À rebours* would offer a model for that of *Le Jardin des supplices* and *La Marquise de Sade*, providing aesthetic form for perverse pleasure, pleasure otherwise suggested in elitist aristocrat Des Esseintes' theatrical sexual affair with his brutish masculine lover and his penchant for literary sadism.⁹⁷ The menacing flowers in *À rebours* display artificial aesthetics—"des fleurs naturelles imitant des fleurs fausses"—and are grotesque and monstrous with "leurs chairs en pourriture, les magnifiques hideurs" (89, 93).⁹⁸ These flowers embody a human corporeality, inserting the body and its pleasure within the sphere of artificial art, a notion exemplified in the following floral description: "ceux-là, comme l'Aurore Boréale, étaient une feuille couleur de viande crue, striée de côtes pourpre, de fibrilles violacées, une feuille tuméfiée, suant le vin bleu et le sang" (89).⁹⁹ The perverse blooms in *À rebours* include the anthurium, which, it is specified, is a member of the *Amorphophallus* species (90–1). The aural allusions of the flower's name cite its figurative effects: "Amorphophallus" references anthropomorphism, the process directing the flowers' human likeness, and "phallus" highlights the sexual nature of this embodiment. Just as grotesque floral aesthetics are defined through corporeal sexuality, the corporeal sexuality of the grotesque woman, who appears in Des Esseintes' nightmare in the second half of the flower-themed chapter, is defined through the flower trope, anticipating the figurative strategy of *Le Jardin des supplices* and *La*

⁹⁴ Pater, *Renaissance*, 198.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁹⁶ Quoted in Octave Mirbeau, Pierre Michel, and Jean-François Nivet, *Octave Mirbeau: Correspondance Générale*, tome premier (Lausanne, Suisse: L'Age d'Homme, 2002), 771; "by dissimilarity of temperament, like dog and cat."

⁹⁷ J.-K. Huysmans, *À rebours* (Paris: Au Sans Pareil, 1924).

⁹⁸ "Natural flowers imitating artificial flowers"; "their rotting flesh, the magnificent hideousness."

⁹⁹ "those, like the Aurora Borealis, flaunted a leaf the color of raw meat, grooved with crimson ribs and purplish fibrils, a bloated leaf sweating blue wine and blood."

Marquise de Sade: “ses lèvres se teignaient du rouge furieux des Anthurium; les boutons de ses seins éclataient, vernis tels que deux gousses de piment rouge,” and Des Esseintes witnesses “s’épanouir sous les cuisses à l’air, le farouche Nidularium qui bâillait, en saignant, dans des lames de sabre” (97–8).¹⁰⁰ The woman embodies violent, grotesque sexuality that finds its aesthetic form in the flower figure; indeed, this threatening, perverse woman is “la Fleur” (98).¹⁰¹

Considering that Rachilde’s work was substantially influenced by *À rebours*, it is perhaps unsurprising that flowers are also used to characterize female sadistic sexuality in *La Marquise de Sade*.¹⁰² As her sexuality evolves, Mary “s’était épanouie en une floraison mystérieuse” and her desire, like Clara’s, is excited by flowers: when smelling roses, Mary experiences “de vagues rougeurs, les lèvres tremblantes.”¹⁰³ The masochistic pleasure Mary provokes in her lovers is also metaphorized in the effect of flowers. Mary’s uncle Antoine-Célestin Barbe feels suffocated by the flowers in the same way that is suffocated by her cruel eroticism, and her younger lover Paul explains his erotic suffering via the flower trope: “écoutez, Mary, ce sont les roses [...] Mon Dieu! que je souffre! [...] je vous aime ... je t’aime ... Ah! que tu es belle!” (250, 207).¹⁰⁴ In response to Paul’s nosebleed, Mary’s sadistic pleasure is metaphorized within the “roses magnifiques” that surround her (292).¹⁰⁵

In the image of Huysmans’ and Rachilde’s menacing blooms, the aesthetic quality of Clara’s pleasure is characterized through a flower trope that unites gross corporeality with beautiful style, performing the Paterian union of matter and form. That the flower figure functions as pleasure’s material aesthetic form is suggested in the use of flowers as tropes for Clara’s pleased body, marking pleasure as beautiful and beautifying. When Clara’s aesthetic appreciation of rancid meat registers as a somatic experience of sexual pleasure, she becomes flowerlike in appearance: the narrator observes that “aucune grimace de dégoût ne plissait sa peau blanche, aussi fraîche qu’une fleur de cerisier.”¹⁰⁶ Indeed, this pleasure enhances her features: when sexually excited, she bears “la bouche rouge et pareille à la fleur de cydonie” and “les yeux verts, du vert grisâtre qu’ont les jeunes fruits de l’amandier” (188).¹⁰⁷ Pleasure’s bodily expressions are flowerlike: Clara’s “lèvres se gonflaient, tels de durs bourgeons prêts à fleurir” and her nipples become “rose comme une jeune fleur” (169–70, 145).¹⁰⁸ Just as pleasure manifests through Clara’s

¹⁰⁰ “Her lips displayed the furious red of the Anthuriums; her nipples swelled, shining like two red chilies”; “blossoming beneath her naked thighs, a savage Nidularium gaped, bleeding, within the sword blades.”

¹⁰¹ “The Flower.”

¹⁰² Michael R. Finn, *Hysteria, Hypnotism, the Spirits, and Pornography: Fin-de-Siècle Cultural Discourses in the Decadent Rachilde* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009), 162.

¹⁰³ Rachilde, *Marquise de Sade*, 263, 243; “had bloomed in a mysterious flowering”; “faint blushing, trembling lips.”

¹⁰⁴ “Listen, Mary, it’s the roses [...] My God! how I’m suffering! [...] I love you ... I love you ... Ah! how beautiful you are!”

¹⁰⁵ “Magnificent roses.”

¹⁰⁶ Mirbeau, *Jardin des supplices*, 159; “no grimace of disgust creased her white skin, as fresh as a cherry tree blossom.”

¹⁰⁷ “A red mouth like a Cydonia flower”; “green eyes, the grey-green of an almond tree’s young fruit.”

¹⁰⁸ “Lips swelled up, like hard buds ready to blossom”; “pink as a young flower.”

body as floral aesthetics, the aesthetics of the torture garden flowers embody corporeal pleasure, which is indicated through the personification underscoring floral descriptions such as the following: “des cypérus, pareils à des chevelures, des luzules géantes, mêlent leurs feuillages disparates aux inflorescences phalliformes et vulvoïdes des plus stupéfiantes aroïdées” (184–5).¹⁰⁹ The association of the flowers and the human body is constructed through the hair simile and the personifying verb “mêlent,” whilst verbal allusions to phallus and vulva give this corporeal association an overriding sexual tone. This tone is amplified in the description of the thalictus flower, which emits the odor of semen and is distinguished by branches bearing “une gaine ivoirine en forme de sexe” (198).¹¹⁰ By expressing aesthetic appreciation of the sexual—“la belle plante!”—Clara galvanizes the link between pleasure and aesthetics (198).¹¹¹

The pleasure materializing through floral aesthetics acquires a distinctly sadistic tenor in this key passage:

A droite et à gauche, d'immenses fleurs rouges, d'immenses fleurs pourprées, des pivoines couleur de sang et, dans l'ombre, sous les énormes feuilles en parasol des petasites, les anthuriums, pareils à des plèvres saignantes, semblaient nous saluer au passage, ironiquement, et nous montrer le chemin de torture. Il y avait aussi d'autres fleurs, fleurs de boucherie et de massacre, des tigridias ouvrant des gorges mutilées, des diclytras et leurs guirlandes de petits cœurs rouges, et aussi de farouches labiées à la pulpe dure, charnue, d'un teint de muqueuse, de véritables lèvres humaines – les lèvres de Clara – vociférant du haut de leurs tiges molles. – Allez, mes chéris . . . allez donc plus vite . . . Là où vous allez, il y a encore plus de douleurs, plus de supplices, plus de sang qui coule et s'égoutte à travers le sol . . . plus de corps tordus, déchirés, râlent sur les tables de fer . . . plus de chairs hachées qui se balancent à la corde des gibets . . . plus d'épouvante et plus d'enfer . . . Allez, mes amours, allez, lèvres contre lèvres et la main dans la main. Et regardez entre les feuillages et les treillages, regardez se développer l'inferral diorama, et la diabolique fête de la mort. (221–2)¹¹²

Violently beautiful, these flowers reflect their perverse union of grotesque corporeality and beautiful form through their blood-like colour. “Plèvres saignantes” also unites the

¹⁰⁹ “Cyperus plants like masses of hair, giant wood-rushes mingling their contrasting foliage with the phalliform and vulvoïde inflorescence of the most stupefying arum lilies.”

¹¹⁰ “An ivory sheath in the form of genitals.”

¹¹¹ “The beautiful plant!”

¹¹² “To the right and left, immense red flowers, immense crimson flowers, peonies the color of blood and, in the shadows, beneath the enormous parasol-shaped petasite leaves, the anthuriums, like bleeding pleura, seemed to greet us ironically as we passed, and show us the path of torture. There were also other flowers, flowers of butchery and massacre, tigridias opening their mutilated throats, diclytras and their garlands of little red hearts, and also savage labiates of firm, fleshy pulp, the color of mucous membrane, of veritable human lips—Clara’s lips—shrieking from the tops of their languid stems: ‘Come, my dears . . . do come more quickly . . . Where you’re going, there is even more pain, more torture, more blood flowing and dripping into the ground . . . more twisted and torn bodies rasping on iron tables . . . more minced flesh swaying on gallows ropes . . . more horror and more hell . . . Come, my loves, come, lips against lips and hand in hand. And look between the foliage and the lattices, look at the unfolding infernal diorama, and the diabolic festival of death.’”

tactility of the flesh of the flowers with the flesh of the raw, wounded body. The metaphor “fleurs de boucherie et de massacre” summons violent and visceral corporeal experience within beautiful aesthetic form, an effect echoed in the onomatopoeic gristle and cacophony of “tigridias” and “diclytras.” The personifying phrases used in the passage—“saluer” and “vociférant,” and the floral features of “gorges,” “cœurs,” and “lèvres,” nouns weighted with a sexual duality—endow the flowers with a violent corporeality whilst their sexual nature is emphasized with the aural similarity that “labiées” bears to labia (“labia” written identically in French), and the related homograph “lèvres humaines,” “lèvres” also signifying “labia” in French. The corporeality of perverse decadent pleasure is also reflected in the flowers’ “speech,” which, in describing the aesthetics of torture, reflects the source of this pleasure. Pleasure is evoked through the gratuitousness of the passage, flagged in the phrase “plus” and enacted in its excessive repetition. The throbbing rhythm fashioned through the repetition of “plus” and “allez” is marked by an intensifying tempo that threatens to crescendo into an orgasmic peak. The heady and heavy use of alliteration, consonance, assonance, and repetition weights the flowers’ words with an organic excessiveness and an internal rhyme and rhythm that evokes the corporeal sensation of Clara’s pleasure.

Because Clara’s appraisal of torture as art is deliberate and artificial, so too is her affective aesthetic appreciation, that is, her perverse decadent sexual pleasure, highlighting the concerted effort demanded of the aesthete to “strain beyond the frontiers of conventional feeling” in seeking the Paterian prescription of intense and varied experience.¹¹³ Clara’s pleasure is, like the flowers that embody its aesthetic form, “un raffinement diabolique,” and the artificiality of perverse decadent pleasure is signified by the artificiality of the flowers (202).¹¹⁴ Although the flowers grow naturally, their aesthetic value results from meticulous human cultivation: “l’emplacement de chaque végétal avait été [...] laborieusement étudié et choisi [...] La plus humble des fleurs, de même que l’arbre le plus géant, concourait, par sa position même, à une harmonie inflexible, à un ensemble d’art” (195–6).¹¹⁵ They are “taillés selon des formes bizarres” and, like Huysmans’ flowers, exhibit artificial color and texture, “feuillage paradoxal, précieusement ouvré comme un cloisonné [...] qui] passât par toute sorte de colorations, depuis le vert paon jusqu’au bleu d’acier, le rose tendre jusqu’au pourpre barbare, le jaune clair jusqu’à l’ocre brun” (194, 195).¹¹⁶ The “plastic beauty” of the flower figure draws upon the ideological superiority of artificiality popular during the latter half of the nineteenth century to elevate this grotesque pleasure above conventional experience, its “refusal of reality” fortified by its plasticity.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Johnson, *Aestheticism*, 47.

¹¹⁴ “A diabolic refinement.”

¹¹⁵ “The location of each plant had been [...] laboriously studied and chosen [...] The most humble of flowers, like the most gigantic tree, contributed, by its very position, to an inflexible harmony, to an ensemble of art.”

¹¹⁶ “Pruned into bizarre shapes”; “paradoxical foliage, preciously fashioned like cloisonné enamel [...] that] passed through all sorts of colors, from peacock green to steel blue, from pale pink to barbarous crimson, from light yellow to brown ochre.”

¹¹⁷ Philip Knight, *Flower Poetics in Nineteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 170, 174.

This highly sexualized use of flowers can be viewed as a parodic nod to the tendency within the Pre-Raphaelite movement to associate flowers and femininity. Mirbeau mocked this convention in an 1895 edition of *Le Journal*: “see in this precious flower the symbol of an entire aesthetic. Ah! their princesses with lanky bodies and faces like poisonous flowers—who pass on cloud-like stairs to banks of silly moons.”¹¹⁸ Mirbeau’s ironic and burlesque deployment of this popular Pre-Raphaelite figure echoes the novel’s ironic and burlesque deployment of Paterian aestheticism. Pater’s own writing, in contrast, positions flowers as traditional objects of prettiness and charm; indeed, Pater refers to “things as winsome as flowers.”¹¹⁹ However, contradicting this trend—significantly, in using a flower as a metaphor for an aesthetic trend, that of the use of mythology within the Italian Renaissance—Pater describes that which is “unlike any flower men had seen before, the anemone with its concentric rings of strangely blended colour, still to be found by those who search long enough for it.”¹²⁰ Like the blossoms of Mirbeau’s torture garden, Pater’s metaphoric flower is rare, more animal than plant, displaying a disconcerting colorful vibrancy. The link that Pater creates between this flower figure and the strange and perhaps subversive is reinforced by his suggestion that this aesthetic movement was a product of “the sacred and the profane.”¹²¹

Scathing pleasure

The aesthetics of the flower figure, and the perverse pleasure they represent, also serve as a means of political critique in condemning the hypocrisy and brutality exercised by Western European governments. This critique is achieved through the way in which aesthetic status serves as a trope for moral status, beauty for social good and ugliness for moral debasement. Mirbeau’s appraisal of European government had been formed before the Dreyfus affair erupted in 1894, but he had struggled to translate his views into a coherent theme for fiction.¹²² Mirbeau found the impetus to write *Le Jardin des supplices* through his passionate support of Alfred Dreyfus, a French artillery captain of Jewish descent. Within a climate of anti-Semitism, the innocent Dreyfus was accused of selling secret information to the German military, was charged with high treason, and subsequently imprisoned with a life sentence on Devil’s Island, off the coast of French Guiana. Dreyfus endured five years of solitary confinement despite the guilty individual, Ferdinand Walsin Esterhazy, being identified in 1896.¹²³ Although it has few explicit references, the Dreyfus affair was central to honing the critique of *Le Jardin des*

¹¹⁸ Mirbeau quoted and translated in Susan P. Casteras, “Debts to Pre-Raphaelitism: A Pan-European Phenomenon,” in *Worldwide Pre-Raphaelitism*, ed. Thomas J. Tobin (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 129.

¹¹⁹ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (London: Macmillan & Co., Library ed., 1910), 79.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹²² Carr, *Anarchism*, 100.

¹²³ Leslie Derfler, *The Dreyfus Affair* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002).

supplices.¹²⁴ The novel's argument is stated clearly in its "Frontispiece" and explored in explicit terms in its first section, which details the narrator's deceitful political career and the corrupt officials he encounters. Through this narrative, Mirbeau claims that Europeans exercise murder "sous prétexte de gouverner les hommes," elevating this crime "jusqu'au devoir, popularisé jusqu'à l'héroïsme."¹²⁵ The savagery founding the "esprits cultivés" of European culture is evidenced, Mirbeau argues, by "la passion du meurtre et la joie de la chasse à l'homme" that fuelled, amongst other events, the Dreyfus affair (51, 24).¹²⁶ The barbarism and hypocrisy exercised by Western Europe is particularly evident in its colonial rule. A critique of colonialism is concentrated in the narrator's conversation with an English army officer: this officer declares that he kills Africans and Indians "pour les civiliser, c'est-à-dire pour leur prendre leurs stocks d'ivoires et de gommés" and describes Africans as "des bêtes féroces [...] qui] mangent des bananes et broutent des herbes fleuries" (116–7).¹²⁷

With its setting in the debauched garden, the second part of the novel establishes an intimate aesthetic-moral connection in its horticultural descriptions. Mirbeau's comparison of the beauty of China's gardens with the ugliness of Europe's is immediately followed by an account of their moral disparity, figured through Clara's inversion of dominant orientalist ideologies: "vois comme les Chinois, qu'on accuse d'être des barbares, sont au contraire plus civilisés que nous" (162).¹²⁸ Mirbeau's strategy evokes the aestheticization of morality implicit in Rossetti's aesthetics: despite asserting the separation of the aesthetic and moral spheres, Rossetti folds morality back into the aesthetic by arguing that artistic excellence that ignores moral imperatives to "satisfy the sense of beauty" is itself a moral good.¹²⁹ In *Le Jardin des supplices*, refined and beautiful aesthetics also indicate virtuous morality. Europe's gardens: "sont loin encore de la beauté pure des modèles chinois. Selon les dires de Clara, il leur manque cette attraction de haut goût qu'on y ait mêlé les supplices à l'horticulture, le sang aux fleurs [...] Les Chinois sont des jardiniers incomparables, bien supérieurs à nos grossiers horticulteurs qui ne pensent qu'à détruire la beauté des plantes par d'irrespectueuses pratiques et de criminelles hybridations. Ceux-là sont de véritables malfaiteurs et je ne puis concevoir qu'on n'ait pas encore, au nom de la vie universelle, édicté des lois pénales très sévères contre eux."¹³⁰

¹²⁴ Carr, *Anarchism*, 104.

¹²⁵ Mirbeau, *Jardin*, 46, 52; "under the pretext of governing men"; "to the point of duty, popularized to the point of heroism."

¹²⁶ "Cultivated minds"; "the passion for murder and joy in the manhunt."

¹²⁷ "To civilize them, that is to say, to take their stocks of ivory and resin"; "ferocious beasts [...] that] eat bananas and graze on blossoming grass."

¹²⁸ "See how the Chinese, who we accuse of being barbarians, are on the contrary more civilized than us."

¹²⁹ Rossetti, *Poems and Ballads*, 41, 42.

¹³⁰ Mirbeau, *Jardin*, 181–2; "are still far away from the pure beauty of Chinese models. According to Clara's words, they lack the attraction of the refined taste of having mingled torture with horticulture, blood with flowers [...] The Chinese are incomparable gardeners, utterly superior to our crude horticulturalists who only think of destroying the beauty of plants by disrespectful practices and criminal hybridization. These are the real criminals and I cannot conceive that we have not yet, in the name of universal life, enacted the most severe penal laws against them."

The Europeans' lack of artistry and the ugliness of their gardens are framed as social and political crimes. This is reflected, for example, in the aesthetic and moral blunder enacted in giving flowers names such as "*Le général Archinard! ... Il est des narcisses – des narcisses! – qui se dénomment grotesquement: Le Triomphe du Président Félix Faure ... Les fleurs, toute beauté, toute lumière et toute joie ... toute caresse aussi, évoquant les moustaches grognonnes et les lourdes basanes d'un soldat, ou bien le toupet parlementaire d'un ministre!*" (182–3).¹³¹ The moral corruption of the West materializes as the ugly and barren terrain "dans lesquels ne poussent que des acers maigres, des chardons bleuâtres et des cerisiers rabougris qui ne fleurissent jamais," a desolate ugliness that contrasts with the Chinese landscape, with its "sol, gras et riche, couvert de jardins et de vergers, [qui] nourrit les arbres géants et les fleurs merveilleuses!" (161)¹³² These flowers, as superior aesthetic objects, place into relief Europe's aesthetic and moral inferiority. As the flowers serve as metaphors for Clara's pleasure, each *frisson* of voluptuous aesthetic appreciation serves as a means for Clara to personalize this critique within her affective bodily expression, corporealization suggesting a personal investment in the critique.

Western morality is also condemned through a comparison of European and Chinese torture methods. The beauty of Chinese torture contrasts with the vulgarity of European punishment, which, meted out "au fond des geôles, ou sur les places publiques, parmi d'ignobles foules avinées," is sullied by its hypocritical nature (188).¹³³ The aesthetic disparity of Chinese and European torture focuses a critique of colonialism, foreshadowed in the narrator's aforementioned dialogue with the English officer, which sees the narrator exercise his surprising vestige of aesthetic sensibility. Inconsistently with his established immorality, the narrator condemns Europe's brutal and degrading colonialism through aesthetic idiom: the English officer is proud of the artistry of British massacre—he praises the "Dum-Dum" bullet as "charmant" because it can reduce twelve Hindu men to "douze tas de chair en bouillie et d'os littéralement broyés"—but the narrator finds that such descriptions "offensaient le silence et la Beauté!" (119, 120, 118).¹³⁴ This critique is extended through Clara's recollection of the ugly torture that many Algerians suffered during French colonialism: the victims, "qui n'avaient pas commis d'autre crime que de fuir les brutalités de leurs conquérants," are buried in the ground up to their necks and left to roast in the midday desert sun, a form of torture that Clara appraises as being "sans grâce [...] et même sans terreur, ces trente têtes mortes, hors du sol, et semblables à d'informes cailloux!" (189–90).¹³⁵ France's

¹³¹ "*General Archinard! ... There are narcissuses – narcissuses! – that are grotesquely named The Triumph of President Félix Faure ... The flowers, all beauty, all light and all joy ... all caressing too, evoking grouchy moustaches and heavy soldiers' tans or else ministers' parliamentary effrontery!*"

¹³² "In which nothing grew except scrawny maple trees, bluish thistles, and stunted cherry trees that never blossom"; "soil, fertile and rich, covered by gardens and orchards, [that] nourish giant trees and marvelous flowers!"

¹³³ "In the depth of jails, or in public squares, amongst revolting drunken crowds."

¹³⁴ "Charming"; "twelve heaps of mushy flesh and literally crushed bones"; "offended silence and Beauty."

¹³⁵ "Who hadn't committed any crime except to flee the brutalities of their conquerors"; "without grace [...] and even without terror, these thirty dead heads, sticking up out of the ground like formless stones."

stronghold on Algeria was firm during the period in which *Le Jardin des supplices* was written: its colonial budget had tripled in the past fifteen years and “Algeria was well on the way to becoming *Algérie française*.”¹³⁶ Mirbeau’s critique of French colonialism is focused through aesthetics as the injustice of the country’s colonial exploits is represented in their ugliness. In a similar vein, Clara mourns the British-led massacres of the Kandyan wars as “quelque chose de plus horrible qu’un massacre humain: la destruction d’une précieuse, émouvante, innocente beauté (190).¹³⁷ In torture, as in flower cultivation, aesthetic refinement and vulgarity serve as tropes for moral good and evil. Clara experiences pleasure only in response to the beauty of Chinese torture, and, in contrast, torture lacking beautiful aesthetic form, such as Europe’s colonial atrocities, produces only revulsion and rage. Thus, Clara’s perverse sexual pleasure, as an expression of appreciation of the beauty of Chinese torture, reiterates what she verbalizes earlier in the novel: “l’Europe et sa civilisation hypocrite, barbare, c’est le mensonge [...] Vous demeurez, lâchement attaché à des conventions morales ou sociales que vous méprisez, que vous condamnez, que vous savez manquer de tout fondement” (133).¹³⁸ A similar yet fainter means of critique can be located in *La Marquise de Sade*. This is made explicit in the novel’s final chapter, in which Mary compares the sophistication of her own debauched practices with the ugliness of her society’s brutality, observing “une période de lâcheté universelle [...] Ah! ils la faisaient rire avec leur *décadence*, elle était de la *décadence* de Rome et non point de celle d’aujourd’hui.”¹³⁹ As in *Le Jardin des supplices*, when there is no artistry, there can be no pleasure. Mary laments the vulgarity of European crime: “les vols manquaient aujourd’hui de sauvagerie” while the most common form of murder consists of “ces imbéciles, suivant à la file avec leurs quartiers de chairs. . . . Ils ne faisaient pas cela pour l’amour de l’art” (374, 375).¹⁴⁰

Alluring agony in *Poems and Ballads*

Le Jardin des supplices illustrates an instance of perverse decadent pleasure incited by the art of torture, whilst in Swinburne’s *Poems and Ballads*, this pleasure is produced through the aesthetic appreciation of pain’s fleshly visual and aural beauty. In addition to the beautiful floral form of manifestations of pain and the pleasure derived from them, the musicality of pain’s infliction, its melody and rhythm, is embedded within the form of Swinburne’s poetry and so too is the pleasure this produces; pleasure produces

¹³⁶ Robert Aldrich, *Greater France: A History of French Overseas Expansion* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 113.

¹³⁷ “Something more horrible than a human massacre: the destruction of a precious, moving, innocent beauty.”

¹³⁸ “Europe and its hypocritical, barbaric civilization is a lie [...] You shamefully remain attached to the moral or social conventions that you despise, that you condemn, that you know lack all foundation.”

¹³⁹ “A period of universal baseness [...] Ah! they made her laugh with their *décadence*, she belonged to the decadence of Rome and not that of today.”

¹⁴⁰ “Today’s robberies lacked savagery”; “these imbeciles, following in single file with their quarters of flesh . . . they weren’t doing it for the love of art.”

art in becoming pure poetic form. Of course, Swinburne does not draw upon the work of Pater in a manner comparable to Mirbeau: *Poems and Ballads* was published twelve years before Pater's *The Renaissance*. Yet the two authors shared mutual respect and admiration, at least within the 1860s and early 1870s, and it suffices to state that Swinburne wove into his sadomasochistic poetry the principles of a subtly deviant aestheticism that Pater would formally espouse years later, reflecting an intellectual and aesthetic trend circulating at the time. In a letter to Richard Monckton Milnes, 1st Baron Houghton, Swinburne explains his aesthetic approach to representing bleeding flesh: "make fair weals [...] tingling ridges of throbbing purple and darkening crimson."¹⁴¹ Weals, wounds, bruises, and blood—visual manifestations of pain—are rendered beautiful and beautifying for both inflicted and inflictor. In the opening stanza of "Laus Veneris," blood is an adornment, worn like a necklace that flatters the stung subject: "Asleep or waking is it? for her neck,/Kissed over close, wears yet a purple speck/Wherein the pained blood falters and goes out;/Soft, and stung softly – fairer for a fleck" (1–4).¹⁴² In "Anactoria," the beautifying results of pain form the basis of Sappho's appeal to her lover to acquiesce to her strikes: "Would I not hurt thee perfectly? not touch/Thy pores of sense with torture, and make bright/Thine eyes with bloodlike tears and grievous light?" (134–6). The skilled application of pain, assures Sappho, will produce stunning effects, a promised beauty that inverts conventional notions of the blemishing consequences of pain's residue. The beauty of pain is the source of Sappho's desire to inflict it and the source of the pleasure promised to Anactoria. That pain is visually beautiful is reinforced by the repetition of phrases belonging to the category of visibility, to "bright," "light," "eyes," and "eyelids," references that are scattered throughout Swinburne's sadomasochistic poems. In "Dolores," it is the way in which pain beautifies the inflictor that acts as a source of pleasure for the admirer. This figure observes Dolores' beautiful pallor placed into relief by the pink glow aroused by her exertion, "The white wealth of thy body made whiter/By the blushes of amorous blows" (267–70).

In addition to serving as an integral feature of pain, beauty is also its source, as demonstrated in the pain Anactoria inflicts upon Sappho in the poem's opening passage: "My life is bitter with thy love; thine eyes/Blind me, thy tresses burn me, thy sharp sighs/Divide my flesh and spirit with soft sound,/And my blood strengthens, and my veins abound" (1–4). The visual beauty of Anactoria's eyes and hair and the aural beauty of her breath pains Sappho with as much force as Sappho exerts upon Anactoria. This strength is suggested in the verbs that animate Anactoria's hair, eyes, and sigh, whilst parallelism, anaphora, and repetition of the painful actions intensify the sense of beauty's brutish strength. The sharp, blunt pain denoted by "blind" and "burn" is evoked through the sharp, blunt, onomatopoeic evocation of these words, so that the reader gains "a sense of the physical sensation provoked by the force of her love, as much a

¹⁴¹ Quoted in Jeremy Mitchell, "Swinburne—the Disappointed Protagonist," *Yale French Studies* 96 (1999): 81.

¹⁴² Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads and Atalanta in Calydon* (London: Penguin, 2000). All quoted instances of Swinburne's work are cited with line numbers.

suffering as a pleasure.”¹⁴³ Because Sappho’s pain is sourced from beauty, it is aesthetically pleasurable, and this pleasure is indicated in the description of Sappho’s heightened physiology in line 4, the strengthening of her blood as it flows through pulsating veins. That visual beauty is a source of pain is also evoked in the references scattered throughout these poems to eyes and eyelids that are blind and burnt.

Blood and blossoms

“The garden of the Decadents had always been rather crowded,” Denisoff writes, and one might add that it has always been a favored haunt of the more sadistic aesthetes of the nineteenth century.¹⁴⁴ Swinburne announces his place within this clique—indeed, he is one of the group’s founding members—as he articulates the beauty of pain in greater richness through use of the flower trope. Blood manifests as flowers in “Dolores,” in “the kisses that blossom and bud” (114), whilst in “Anactoria,” the delicate color, size, and shape of blood is indicated through the blossom simile in which “flower-sweet fingers” bear “blood like purple blossom” (124, 127). In the following passage, simile is exchanged for a more forceful metaphor so that the organic properties of blood are entirely replaced by floral aesthetics:

Yea, though she scourge thee, sweetest, for my sake,
 Blossom not thorns and flowers not blood should break.
 Ah that my lips were tuneless lips, but pressed
 To the bruised blossom of thy scourged white breast!
 Ah that my mouth for Muses’ milk were fed
 On the sweet blood thy sweet small wounds had bled! (103–8)

Swinburne stresses the significance of the floral metaphor by insisting that the vehicle actually negate the tenor: it is not that blood bears the quality of flowers, but that flowers, *not* blood, bleed from the body. The fusion of blood and flowers, gross corporeality and beautiful form, is strengthened in the linguistic conflation of blossom and blood wrought through the alliteration, assonance, and consonance of these terms. The flowerlike beauty of wounds, bruises, and blood is also evoked through the repetition of “sweet” and “small,” whose alliteration signifies an aesthetic category in which Sappho’s “scourging” is included. The aesthetic beauty of pain is the basis of Sappho’s pleasure, apparent in her yearning to bite and kiss Anactoria’s pained body. That her perverse decadent pleasure is founded upon aesthetic beauty is reinforced by the repetition of “sweet,” signifying both beauty and the pleasure derived from it. In Swinburne’s poetry, the flower trope is used to confer upon pain aesthetic status and

¹⁴³ Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor, “Metaphorical ‘Indiscretion’ And Literary Survival in Swinburne’s ‘Anactoria,’” *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 36, no. 4 (1996): 919.

¹⁴⁴ Dennis Denisoff, “The Dissipating Nature of Decadent Paganism from Pater to Yeats,” *Modernism/Modernity* 15, no. 3 (2008): 431.

beauty. Just as torture's aesthetic qualities stimulate Clara's pleasure in *Le Jardin des supplices*, the visual beauty of pain is the source of its eroticism in *Poems and Ballads*.

The flower trope serves a second function: to give aesthetic form to pleasure. Through the dual signification of this metaphor, perverse decadent sexuality attains the aesthetic status of the flower and its subtext of delicacy and finesse, as it does in Mirbeau's novel. The formal embodiment of perverse decadent pleasure within the flower is indicated in "Anactoria" in the line "Blossom not thorns and flowers not blood should break" (104). The sight of Anactoria's blood incites pleasure rather than distress through the blood's flowerlike beauty, as indicated in the phrase "blossom not thorns," in which floral beauty and ugliness serve as tropes for pleasure and aversion. That somatic pleasure is derived from the floral beauty of blood, that these events are inextricably bound, is suggested by the use of the hypozeugma "break," which structures this sentence from its concluding position. The embodiment of pleasure within flowers is suggested throughout "Dolores," most notably in the phrase "the raptures and roses of vice" (68), the term "vice" flagging the significance of intended immorality. The aesthetic beauty of perverse decadent pleasure is declared by Tannhäuser in "Laus Veneris": "Brief bitter bliss, one hath for a great sin;/Nathless thou knowest how sweet a thing it is" (171–2). The mentioned sin is the bliss Tannhäuser derives from Venus' charring kiss, the sin of pleasure derived from pain, and the beauty of this sin is emphasized through repetition (323–4). Tannhäuser recognizes the same beautiful pleasure in Venus: "I knew the beauty of her, what she was,/The beauty of her body and her sin,/And in my flesh the sin of hers, alas!" (310–12). The prozeugma "beauty" in line 311 denotes both the beauty of Venus' body and the aesthetic beauty of her bodily affect. Although the flower trope is not used directly here, its connection with pleasure is forged as pleasure performs the same stylistic function as the flower figure that unites bodily pain with beauty: pleasure, like this flower, unites the grotesque corporeality of sexual sin with aesthetic beauty. As in *Le Jardin des supplices*, the pervert in *Poems and Ballads* is both a critic of lived experience and an artist, an aesthetic producer in expressing its subjective appraisal of this experience. As grotesque corporeality united with beautiful floral style, perverse sexual pleasure performs the Paterian union of matter and form.

Smiting arias

Another striking aesthetic production of pain in *Poems and Ballads* is music. This is most notable in "Anactoria," in which "Anactoria's cries of pain will be the music played on the instrument of her tortured body: her tunes and tones are, literally, 'interludes.'¹⁴⁵ Pain is carefully applied with an artist's skill, in measures too soft to kill but with enough force to compose rhythm and melody. The infliction of pain, it is declared, is an art that, when executed with an apt refinement and delicacy, can be perfected: Sappho

¹⁴⁵ Yopie Prins, "Swinburne's Sapphic Sublime," in *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 126.

observes “pain made perfect in thy lips,” makes “perfect pangs convulse thy perfect mouth,” and reassures Anactoria: “Would I not hurt thee perfectly?” (128, 142, 134). Prins notes that “rhyme and rhythm are both cause and effect of Anactoria’s pain,”¹⁴⁶ and as pain produces aural beauty, it also produces aesthetic pleasure; as the music of pain is woven into Swinburne’s poetic form, so too is the pleasure this music incites. In commenting that Swinburne’s “eye and [...] speech are always those of a poet,” Rossetti flags the integral connection between artistic perception and expression, which is apparent in these melodious poems: the aural beauty of pain, which is perceived through subjective apprehension, materializes within the expression of this perception.¹⁴⁷ The first passage in “Anactoria” is notable in depicting pain’s aural beauty:

I would find grievous ways to have thee slain,
 Intense device, and superflux of pain;
 Vex thee with amorous agonies and shake
 Life at thy lips, and leave it there to ache;
 Strain but thy soul with pangs too soft to kill,
 Intolerable interludes, and infinite ill;
 Relapse and reluctance of the breath,
 Dumb tunes and shuddering semitones of death (27–34)

The language used in Swinburne’s *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865), as Prins details, enacts the described violence; through cadence and repetition, Swinburne constructs “verses that strike and sting,” “transferring the effect of ‘things in verse’ to the action of the ‘Verse’ itself.”¹⁴⁸ This is also evinced in the passage quoted from “Anactoria,” in which the somatic experience of pain is evoked in the steady, rolling, relentless rhythm of the iambic pentameter. The strength of this rhythmic pain is instated in the masculine rhyme that closes each line, evoking the sharp, abrupt, somatic sensation of pain achieved by Sappho’s carefully measured pangs and echoing the acute notes of Anactoria’s cries. The music wrought through the pangs and blows proceeds through varying movements: the passage opens with pangs that utter short staccato notes, gestured in Swinburne’s frequent use of single- and double-syllable words. A sharp, quick-paced rhythm manifests in the internal rhyme of the alternating assonance of “eye” and “aye” sounds. The violent song progresses from an allegro to a moderato tempo that sees the strikes performed with a graceful legato, a softer, cascading cadence fashioned through longer polysyllabic words in lines 32–4. Heavy consonance, assonance, and alliteration, particularly in line 32, create a fluid, warbling melody, and although these interludes are physically intolerable, their aural beauty renders the agony both amorous and faultless (29, 140). The painful words and rhythm bear an aesthetically pleasing lyricism, exhibiting Swinburne’s “powerful rhythmic and lyrical gift.”¹⁴⁹ As the

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Rossetti, *Poems and Ballads*, 64.

¹⁴⁸ Prins, “Sapphic Sublime,” 125, 124.

¹⁴⁹ Rossetti, *Poems and Ballads*, 58.

verse strikes and stings with a pleasurable musicality, the pleasure of pain, derived from its aural beauty, materializes within the euphony of the verse, within the “musically and metrically flawless” poetic form.¹⁵⁰ The “aural seductions” of Swinburne’s “hypnoidal rhythms” signify no less than the appeal of perverse decadent pleasure, offered to the reader in the aesthetic pleasure that drenches the poetry.¹⁵¹ The transformation of aesthetic pleasure into surging somatic pleasure is evoked in the rising rhythm of the poem’s iambic feet: perverse sexual pleasure is, as the eros that Prins observes in Sappho’s poetry, fashioned as the “rhythmic effect that is also performed in the [...] rhythm [...] creeping up, impossible to fight off, relentlessly advancing in the meter itself,” rendered an aesthetic object through the form of Swinburne’s verse.¹⁵² Derived from the aural beauty of pain perceived through subjective apprehension, pleasure manifests through subjective expression, through and as the “verbal and rhythmical harmonies of the most beautiful.”¹⁵³

As well as being a product of pain, aural beauty is also its source: Anactoria’s music, the rhythm and cadence of her feet and her voice, wields a vicious blow to Sappho. Swinburne animates beauty as an animal and as a weapon to express the varying sensations of pain it inflicts, pain that, sourced from beauty, is inherently pleasurable. This relationship surfaces within the verse’s form; the “wonderful charm of metric melody, and reverberating volume of music” that characterizes the following passage is also acutely painful.¹⁵⁴

Ah, ah, thy beauty! like a beast it bites,
 Stings like an adder, like an arrow smites
 Ah sweet, and sweet again, and seven times sweet,
 The paces and the pauses of thy feet!
 Ah sweeter than all sleep or summer air
 The fallen fillets fragrant from thine hair!
 Yea, though their alien kisses do me wrong,
 Sweeter thy lips than mind with all their song (115–22)

As Prins notes, the music of the passage is agonizing, “impossible to fight off, stinging like an adder, smiting like an arrow, to produce the rhythmic repetition of ‘ah, ah’ and the measured cadence of ‘Ah sweet, and sweet again, and seven times sweet’ [...] Sappho is subjected to the striking rhythm of her own language.”¹⁵⁵ Yet this smiting is always sublime: with its meticulous, quick-paced meter, sharp rhyme, and characteristic use of alliteration, consonance, and assonance, pleasure is both caused by, and

¹⁵⁰ David A. Cook, “The Content and Meaning of Swinburne’s ‘Anactoria,’” *Victorian Poetry* 9, no. 1/2 (1971): 93.

¹⁵¹ Richard Sieburth, “Poetry and Obscenity: Baudelaire and Swinburne,” *Comparative Literature* 36, no. 5 (1984): 351.

¹⁵² Prins, “Sapphic Sublime,” 113.

¹⁵³ Rossetti, *Poems and Ballads*, 64.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁵⁵ Prins, “Sapphic Sublime,” 127.

materializes within, aural rhythm and harmony. This materialization is epitomized in the repeated phrase “sweet,” signifying both pleasure and aesthetic beauty, the phrase’s rhythmic repetition evoking beauty’s brutish blows and the somatic throbbing of pleasure they incite; it is the somatic experience of perverse decadent pleasure that is, to borrow Prins’ phrase, “bodied forth as rhythm itself.”¹⁵⁶ Perverse decadent pleasure, then, becomes an aesthetic object in *Poems and Ballads* as it does in *Le Jardin des supplices*. When pleasure is derived from the visual beauty of pain and materializes in flower form, it performs the Paterian fusion of form and matter, but when pleasure is derived from pain’s aural beauty and materializes as an aesthetic object within Swinburne’s expression, it achieves Rossetti’s aesthetic ideal, incarnate as pure form, “poetic execution.”¹⁵⁷

Critical cadences

As in *Le Jardin des supplices*, the art form of pleasure articulates discontent with, and a desire to break from, social norms and Victorian morality. Swinburne’s perception of his society as prudish, repressive, and hypocritical is apparent in his *Notes on Poems and Reviews*, also written in 1866 to deflect the ire that *Poems and Ballads* drew from many critics, their attack “seldom, if ever, equalled for its fierceness in the annals of English literary history.”¹⁵⁸ Upon its release, *Poems and Ballads* was described, for example, as “depressing and misbegotten [...] utterly revolting” in the *London Review* and as the work of “a mere madman [...] who has got maudlin drunk on lewd ideas and lascivious thoughts” in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, whilst the *Sunday Gazette* declared that “it is a degradation to dissect such trash as this.”¹⁵⁹ In *Notes on Poems and Reviews*, Swinburne defends his work by condemning his critics’ understanding of the role of art. He refutes the idea that the “first and last requisite of art is to give no offence” and that literature “that cannot be lisped in the nursery or fingered in the schoolroom is [...] to be cast out of the library.”¹⁶⁰ This restricted conception of art, “so monstrous an absurdity,” could, Swinburne contends, only exist in England, with its “artificial network of proprieties,” and where “cant [is] at once so foul-mouthed and so tight-laced.”¹⁶¹ This public statement echoes Swinburne’s private comment to M. D. Conway that derided “the abject and faithless and blasphemous timidity of our wretched English literary society.”¹⁶²

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁵⁷ Rossetti, *Poems and Ballads*, 21.

¹⁵⁸ Clyde Kenneth Hyder, *Swinburne’s Literary Career and Fame* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1933), 37.

¹⁵⁹ Quoted in Hyder, *Career and Fame*, 41, 51; undated newspaper clipping from the *Sunday Gazette*, in collection “Swinburne – Relating to Controversy over his ‘Poems and Ballads,’ Swinburne’s *Notes and Reviews* etc.” The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library.

¹⁶⁰ Algernon Charles Swinburne, “Notes on Poems and Reviews,” in *Poems and Ballads and Atalanta in Calydon* (London: Penguin, 2000), 413.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 414.

¹⁶² Quoted in Hyder, *Career and Fame*, 39–40.

Swinburne's work, then, can be contextualized as an affront to and a comment on what he saw as Britain's hypocritical and sanctimonious character and its moralistic conception of art.

It is the form of Swinburne's poetry as well as its themes that stages an affront, the furor meeting the release of *Poems and Ballads* incited as much by its style as its purportedly obscene subject matter. The poetry's lyrical excess, its "unpruned exuberance of language and imagery," evidenced, according to critics of the time, Swinburne's "perverted moral perception."¹⁶³ One of Swinburne's most venomous detractors was Robert Buchanan, who, in 1871, grouped Swinburne within the literary stratum he deemed the "Fleshly School of Poetry." Buchanan reviles the form of *Poems and Ballads*—its "endless alliteration," "hideous phraseology," and "euphuistic [...] wordy glitter of rhyme"—as much as its "heinous," "outrageous," "blasphemous," and "atrocious" subject matter.¹⁶⁴ For Buchanan, Swinburne's stylistic excess signifies not only formal tastelessness, but also personal vice, because, he contends, foreshadowing Pater's equation of style with subjectivity, poetry's form reveals the soul of its author: "a poem is a poem, first as to the soul, next to the form. The fleshly persons who wish to create form for its own sake are merely pronouncing their own doom."¹⁶⁵ As "no unsound soul is clad in a sound form," Swinburne's unsound, gratuitous, and hedonistic form reveals a persona of the same nature.¹⁶⁶

According to Buchanan, the immorality of Swinburne's formalism also lies in its repudiation of meaning, that his words signify "absolutely next to nothing [...] as shapeless and undigested as chaos itself."¹⁶⁷ An emphasis on excessive style exerts political comment in its repudiation of socially valuable matter and the "virulently anti-aesthetic Utilitarianism" of traditional Victorian values.¹⁶⁸ This is observed by Adorno, who, whilst critical of the posited distinction between form and matter, declares that "art's opposition to the real world is in the realm of form."¹⁶⁹ Used as a vehicle for social critique, form's condemnation of society is implicit in its disassociation from it; form "*per se* is a subversive protest."¹⁷⁰ This is a particularly paradoxical mode of critique, as "the manner in which art communicates with the outside world is in fact also a lack of communication, because art seeks, blissfully or unhappily, to seclude itself from the world."¹⁷¹ Form's critique also relies upon the assumption that the realm "beyond praxis" is necessarily better, and this is evident in Swinburne's use of lyrical form as a "display of amoral and immoral virtuosity."¹⁷² This affront to and dissociation

¹⁶³ Baynes quoted in Thais E. Morgan, "Mixed Metaphor, Mixed Gender: Swinburne and the Victorian Critics," *The Victorian Newsletter* 73 (1988): 17.

¹⁶⁴ Robert Buchanan, *The Fleshly School of Poetry and Other Phenomena of the Day* (New York: AMS Press, 1972), 80, 89, 88, 36.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁶⁸ Eagleton, *Ideology*, 61.

¹⁶⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 7.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 362.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 17; Jerome McGann, *Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 206.

from Victorian society is localized within perverse decadent pleasure, which takes sensualism—considered by Buchanan and the self-righteous bourgeoisie he was deemed to represent, as “the cancer of all society [...] shooting its ulcerous roots deeper and deeper”—to a deeper level of depravity.¹⁷³ This immoral pleasure, which suggests a desire for dissociation in the distance it bears from the ordinary experience of the masses, amplifies its immorality and distancing effects in its materialization through and as style.

Like the aesthetic apprehension of torture in *Le Jardin des supplices*, the appraisal of pain’s visual and aural beauty in *Poems and Ballads* is self-conscious and artificial, reflecting the aesthetic values that Pater would later formulate in his theory of grotesque beauty and capitalizing upon the capacity of these values to articulate social critique and disassociation. The pleasure derived from pain’s beauty is therefore also a contrived cultivation, its artificiality emphasized by the concerted design of Swinburne’s poetic expression, particularly its precise adherence to the rules of meter. Prins notes that “Swinburne’s approach to rhythm is anything but natural” and Paglia identifies Swinburne’s form as a “self-consciously beautiful mode of discourse.”¹⁷⁴ Through unnatural, rigorously disciplined, and self-consciously beautiful form and rhythm, pleasure materializes displaying the same qualities. Rossetti notes the artifice of sexual pleasure in *Poems and Ballads*, describing Swinburne’s “passionate sensuousness,” like the form through which it is articulated, as “too determinate and prepense, too uneasily iterative, not exceptionally genuine, but near to being actually factitious.”¹⁷⁵ In *Swinburne’s Poems and Ballads: a Criticism*, Rossetti uses this artifice as a defense against claims of Swinburne’s moral degradation but makes no mention of the intentionality of this degradation, that Swinburne “wanted [his poetry] to be shocking.”¹⁷⁶ However, a letter that Rossetti wrote to Swinburne in 1891 suggests that he was well aware of the pleasure Swinburne took in the supposed immorality of his work and the outrage this immorality provoked: in this letter he reminisces about “the howling over *Poems and Ballads*” that characterized “the good old days.”¹⁷⁷ Swinburne’s conscious veer towards the immoral is, however, acknowledged by Buchanan: “‘I *will* be naughty!’ screamed the little boy.”¹⁷⁸ Buchanan uses sarcasm when he declares that “Mr Swinburne and Mr Rossetti are honest men [...] loving what is beautiful [...] they do not quite realise that they are merely supplementing the literature of Holywell Street, and writing books well worthy of being sold under ‘sealed covers.’”¹⁷⁹ Not only did Swinburne realize exactly how his poetry fitted within the moral, aesthetic, and

¹⁷³ Buchanan, *Fleshly School*, 1.

¹⁷⁴ Prins, “Sapphic Sublime,” 167; Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 461.

¹⁷⁵ Rossetti, *Poems and Ballads*, 19.

¹⁷⁶ McGann, *Swinburne*, 203.

¹⁷⁷ William Michael Rossetti to Algernon Charles Swinburne, 29 November 1891, Rossetti, William Michael papers, The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library.

¹⁷⁸ Buchanan, *Fleshly School*, 36.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 83–4.; Holywell Street was, at the time, known for its pornographic booksellers.

sexual standards of his culture, but he worked hard to establish its scandalous position. The lofty defiance and conscious deviation driving *Poems and Ballads*' construction of perverse decadent pleasure is bolstered by its artifice, which fulfills the Decadent demand "not to communicate [...] vision but to express [...] individuality, to enshrine in splendidly factitious forms the product of a prolonged self-indulgence in aesthetic appetites beyond the imagination and the means of the Philistine."¹⁸⁰

The decadent pervert aims to endow itself with the beauty of the form through which its pleasure manifests in order to expand the distance between itself and society, yet this agenda is undermined by the disgust it intentionally invites, solidifying relations between elite artist and the vulgar masses. As Downing observes, the cultivation of perverse sexual practices displays "a response to, or gesture in the direction of, social exigencies, rather than an oblivious existence outside of society."¹⁸¹ In its particular aesthetic project, the figure of the perverse decadent invokes that which is vulgar—albeit through "fine" form—in order to distance and elevate itself from vulgarity, a repudiation "explicitly antithetical to the text's own literary project."¹⁸² In *Le Jardin des supplices*, perverse pleasure condemns brutal state-sanctioned murder in being stimulated by murder, and *Poems and Ballads* condemns failed and affronting systems of morality through its intended moral affront. The pervert's critique, then, is bound within its antagonist's terms of reference. This opposition motivates the mode of appraisal that produces perverse pleasure; this art form does not exist solely for its own sake but also for the sake of its antagonist, without whom this form of pleasure would lack an object of critique, a point of reaction and dissociation, and hence perhaps even grounds for cultivation.

With the ensuing decades, the aesthetic imperative of what would now be understood as sadomasochism would evolve from a means of articulating social critique to a more inward-pointing query. In the mid-twentieth-century literary output of the French avant-garde, delight in surface and artifice gave way to the question of the truth of existence; the contrived construction of an elitist public persona was exchanged for the wholesale reconstruction of the self; and ironic posturing and playful provocation relinquished to a most serious, profound, and distinctly Nietzschean brand of cruelty and violence.

¹⁸⁰ Jerome Hamilton Buckley, *The Victorian Temper: A Study in Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 218.

¹⁸¹ Lisa Downing, "Beyond Reasonable Doubt: Aesthetic Violence and Motiveless Murder in French Decadent Fiction," *French Studies* 58, no. 2 (2004): 197.

¹⁸² Felski, "Counterdiscourse," 1099.

Tragic self-shattering I: Nietzsche's aesthetics

Nietzsche's first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), optimistically declares that “*the gradual awakening of the Dionysiac spirit* is taking place in the world in which we live!” and announces the imminent “rebirth of tragedy” blooming from the ruins of rationality and science.¹ Nietzsche's vision, I suggest, is realized in sadomasochism-themed literature published over eighty years later. As will become apparent within this chapter and the two that follow, French avant-garde literature of the 1950s constructs sadomasochism—or rather, violent sexuality—as a Dionysian aesthetic experience founded upon Nietzsche's philosophy of tragedy. In Chapter 5, I examine Georges Bataille's *L'Érotisme* (1957) and briefly discuss his *Histoire de l'œil*, which, despite being published in 1928, displays the Nietzschean tropes that are elaborated in his later work. *Histoire d'O* (1954) by Pauline Réage serves as my focus in Chapter 6, with comparisons drawn to *L'image* by Jean de Berg. *Histoire d'O* and *L'image* primarily draw upon the aesthetic philosophy of *The Birth of Tragedy*, translated into French in 1901—crucially, the themes of Apollo and Dionysus—while Bataille's *L'Érotisme* incorporates these key themes within the physiological framework of Nietzsche's *The Will to Power*, which was posthumously published in German in 1901 and translated into French in 1935. With their Nietzschean foundation, the works of Réage, Bataille, and Berg construct violent sexuality as an aesthetic experience that serves to dissolve individual subjectivity and refashion collective or universal subjectivity. In demonstrating this, I show how this particular form of aesthetic sexuality is constructed as a form of self-creation, shifting the focus of the preceding chapters that have illustrated how what we would now consider as sadomasochism functions primarily as a form of social communication. In showing that subjective shattering and reconstruction can be experiences of sublime pleasure, I also show how aesthetic sexuality in contemporary Western culture incorporates the “singular bliss, obliviousness to time and limits” that Foucault, in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, identifies as being central to the *ars erotica* of

¹ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, eds. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 94, 76.

ancient and Eastern societies.² In the case of mid-twentieth-century French avant-garde literature, this pleasurable experience of self-shattering responds to the agenda that underscores Nietzsche's aesthetic philosophy, the assertion of the impossibility of metaphysical truth and subjective essence. Let us begin, then, with an inquisitive inspection of Nietzsche's understanding of art.

Reading *The Birth of Tragedy* alongside *The Will to Power* is an admittedly precarious practice. Many Nietzsche scholars deem *The Will to Power* an inappropriate text through which to examine Nietzsche's thought because of the conditions of its publication. Nietzsche's plan to write a final work entitled "The Will to Power" was thwarted by the insanity that would claim the final ten years of his life. After he died in 1900, the ideas he had written in his notebooks were tendentiously selected, organized, and edited into the 1901 publication by his sister Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche. Thirty-five years later, this text was used to support Nazi ideology.³ Elisabeth's anti-Semitic skewing of her brother's work was condemned by Bataille in the journal *Acéphale*, in which he calls her "ÉLISABETH JUDAS-FOERSTER."⁴ Despite these circumstances, *The Will to Power* supports one of the primary aims of this book, which is to demonstrate how cultural formations of sadomasochism share significant connections with aesthetic theory and philosophy. This section of the book poses a relationship of influence between Nietzschean aesthetics and the work of Réage and Bataille. Although Bataille was well aware of the partisan publication of *The Will to Power*, he was nonetheless heavily influenced by the work: even a cursory glance at Bataille's *Sur Nietzsche* (1945), with its extensive quotes from *The Will to Power* and accompanying emotive commentary, reveals Bataille's deep investment in this text. The questionable authenticity of *The Will to Power* in regards to Nietzsche's intentions did not thwart the work's profound influence upon Bataille and numerous other thinkers, and it is this influence, rather than the authenticity of *The Will to Power*, that concerns this chapter and the two that follow. *The Will to Power* is an important source of Nietzsche's aesthetic philosophy, containing the most sustained discourse on the subject since *The Birth of Tragedy*. Yet these two works, produced thirty years apart, entail a significant conceptual disparity: *The Birth of Tragedy* is heavily indebted to Schopenhauer and is accordingly saturated with his metaphysical discourse, while in the later text the Schopenhauerean will is transformed into the will to power amidst a vehement rejection of Schopenhauer and all forms of metaphysics. Despite this, the two works share many links that become prominent when examining the texts' account of aesthetic experience: they can both be read as critiquing the notion of metaphysical truth, albeit through different strategies; *The Will to Power* presents an elaboration of the Dionysian aesthetic state introduced in *The Birth of Tragedy*; and the articulation of provisional subjectivity in the earlier text may be read as Nietzsche's first step toward his philosophy of becoming.

² Foucault, *Will to Knowledge*, 58.

³ Jacob Golomb and Robert S. Wistrich, *Nietzsche, Godfather of Fascism? On the Uses and Abuses of a Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 147.

⁴ Georges Bataille, "Nietzsche et les fascistes," in *Œuvres complètes, I Premiers Écrits 1922–1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 447.

Apollo and Dionysus

Nietzsche's aesthetic philosophy, true to the aims of nineteenth-century aestheticism, examines "art through the prism of life" by means of the Apollo and Dionysus duality, "two art-worlds which differ in their deepest essence and highest goals."⁵ These art-worlds compose Greek tragedy but are also the "all-powerful artistic drives in nature."⁶ Nietzsche anthropomorphizes nature as an artist figure that dictates man's impulses: "art manifests itself in man even as a force of nature" so that man's instincts reveal the "artistic powers within us."⁷ Greek tragedy is, therefore, Nietzsche's model for human experience, which consists of the alternating aesthetic experiences of Apollonian and Dionysian consciousness. Both Apollonian and Dionysian forms of consciousness are states of intoxication. Apollo offers the intoxication of "image-making," beauty, and dream, "keeping the eye in particular aroused" through its "mirror of semblance."⁸ Nietzsche designates Apollo as the "daylight world"—a suitable domain for Greek mythology's sun god—and describes the Apollonian subject as having a "sun-like" eye.⁹ To Apollo's realm belongs a tranquility expressed through the metaphor of the Apollonian subject sitting "calmly in his rocking boat in the midst of the sea," a notion repeated in *The Gay Science* as "quiet, stillness, calm seas."¹⁰ Apollonian calm is both product and precondition of the *principium individuationis*, the principle of individuation that defines the subject as "absolutely isolated," a "typical 'individual.'"¹¹ Governed by the sanctity of the individual, "the aesthetic necessity of beauty is accompanied by the demands: 'Know thyself' and 'Not too much!';" individuality is maintained by self-knowledge and moderation that preserves one's limits.¹² While "sexuality and voluptuousness" belong primarily to the Dionysian realm, they are not absent from the Apollonian, with its beauty that "revives aphrodisiac bliss."¹³ Nietzsche's concept of beauty is deeply eroticized: beauty results from "the creative instinct of the artist and the distribution of his semen in his blood"; indeed, he states that "the desire for art and beauty is an indirect longing for the ecstasy of sexual desire."¹⁴ Those possessing "artistic sensibility" are aware of the dream status of the Apollonian realm, aware that it is merely semblance, and take "profound pleasure" in it, proclaiming "It is a dream! I will dream on!"¹⁵ Yet while pleasure may be taken in semblance, it is not desirable to "consist of and [be] completely trapped in semblance," to mistake semblance for what it "truly is not [...] in their words, empirical reality."¹⁶ Nietzsche's notion of

⁵ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 5, 77.

⁶ Ibid., 25.

⁷ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 240.

⁸ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 15, 48, 31.

⁹ Ibid., 77, 16.

¹⁰ Ibid., 26; Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 234.

¹¹ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 76; Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 416.

¹² Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 27.

¹³ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 241, 247.

¹⁴ Ibid., 247–8.

¹⁵ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 16.

¹⁶ Ibid., 26.

Apollonian semblance is based upon Schopenhauer's conceptualization, articulated in *The World as Will and Representation* (1818), that the physical world and the individual body is an illusory "veil of maya," a manifestation of the will, which is the Kantian "thing-in-itself," the metaphysical "inner nature of the world."¹⁷ For Nietzsche, different qualities of the will are represented by the Dionysian realm.

Although the Dionysian aesthetic is positioned as the crucial element of tragedy, like human experience, tragedy consists of the interplay between Dionysian and Apollonian drives: "both of these artistic drives are required to unfold their energies in strict, reciprocal proportion."¹⁸ Theirs is an antagonistic relationship: "Apollonian consciousness" smothers and obscures man's Dionysian instincts, while Dionysus destroys Apollo's "veil of maya" (21). The reign of Dionysus leaves Apollo "suspended and annulled," but when Apollo gains ground, it wrenches "man out of his orgiastic self-destruction" and reignites "delight in individuals" (26, 102). While antagonistic, these two art-worlds are not always entirely distinct: because Dionysus reveals Apollo to be "a persistent veiling [. . .] it finally drives the Apollonian drama itself into a sphere where it begins to speak with Dionysiac wisdom and where it negates itself and its Apollonian visibility" (103–4). Ultimately, Dionysus is the victor of this persistent competition: "Dionysos speaks the language of Apollo, but finally it is Apollo who speaks that of Dionysos." When this occurs, "the supreme goal of tragedy and indeed of all art, is attained" (104). Despite their opposition, the Apollonian and Dionysian realms are reliant upon each other, sharing "reciprocal necessity" (26). Dionysus is defined by the act of destroying Apollonian consciousness, a notion suggested in Nietzsche's statement that "the significance of the Greeks' Dionysiac orgies was that of [. . .] release and redemption [. . .] the tearing-apart of the *principium individuationis* becomes an artistic phenomenon" (20–1). "Tearing-apart" is the primary quality of Dionysus, the basis of Dionysian pleasure, and thus Apollo is central to Dionysian experience in its capacity to be destroyed. Once Dionysian consciousness subsides, man is repulsed by the terrible truths he has experienced (40). He escapes these truths through Apollonian semblance, which is a "necessary result of gazing into the inner, terrible depths of nature – radiant patches, as it were, to heal a gaze seared by gruesome night" (46). Therefore, the Dionysian drives, although seeking to destroy Apollonian semblance, paradoxically contain "a fervent longing [. . .] for their redemption and release in semblance" (25). Since the Dionysian realm requires the Apollonian as an escape from itself, it may also be identified as creating it, and indeed Nietzsche implies as much when he writes that "the whole world of agony is needed in order to compel the individual to generate the releasing and redemptive vision" (26). Dionysus requires and hence creates Apollo, and so the latter is therefore dependent upon the former: "Apollo could not live without Dionysos" (27).

In contrast with the Apollonian world of image and semblance, the Dionysian aesthetic is associated with the "imageless art of music," rooted in the Dionysian

¹⁷ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 642.

¹⁸ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 116.

dithyramb, a hymn to the god Dionysus that played a crucial role in Greek tragedy (14, 51). Tragedy's "purely religious origins" are to be distinguished from Christianity, which "negates, damns and condemns" art.¹⁹ If much of Nietzsche's thinking had changed between *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Will to Power*, his antipathy towards Christianity had not; in the latter text, he describes Christianity as an "inartistic state" that denies life in contrast to art, which embraces life in all its ugly truth.²⁰ Nietzsche's life-affirming Dionysian aesthetic draws heavily on, but also diverges from, Schopenhauer's concept of the will. Schopenhauer argues that the will's manifestation as individuality is responsible for the "constant suffering and dying," the "trouble, pain, [and] anxiety" that compose life.²¹ He suggests that the only means of escape from this suffering is through aesthetic experience. Music, in particular, allows one to transcend the will's objectification as individuality by allowing one to intuit the will in its metaphysical essence: "music is by no means like the other arts, namely a copy of the Ideas, but a *copy of the will itself*."²² For Schopenhauer, "the aesthetic experience in art, and particularly in music, leads to a pure mode of contemplation in which [...] man is raised above all willing and all individuality [...] there is no more struggle, no more pain, but merely a state of pure will-less contemplation."²³ By intuiting the will through aesthetic experience, man is freed from the suffering that its manifestation in representation instates. Nietzsche anthropomorphizes Schopenhauer's metaphysical will using various names: "the primordial being," "the primal mother," the "father of all things," and the "Primordial Unity";²⁴ it is also "the ground of things" and identified with nature, a conflation evident in Nietzsche's description of "the Apolline and its opposite, the Dionysiac, as artistic powers which erupt from nature itself," and in his reference to "the innermost ground of man, indeed of nature itself."²⁵ It is the Schopenhauerean will, then, that manifests as the Apollonian and Dionysian "artistic drives" in man. However, while Schopenhauer views pain and suffering as functions of the will's objectification in the body, Nietzsche views these qualities as "characteristic of the primal unity or universal will itself."²⁶ For Nietzsche, Dionysian aesthetic experience, in allowing an intuition of the will, does not deliver one from suffering, but, on the contrary, unites one with "eternal, primal pain, the only ground of the world."²⁷ Death, destruction, and suffering, the knowledge that "everything which comes into being must be prepared for painful destruction," are truths obscured by Apollonian semblance but embraced in the Dionysian aesthetic (80). As a means of celebrating the subject of Schopenhauer's pessimism, the Dionysian aesthetic is central to the overall project of *The Birth of Tragedy*, which is to overhaul the "phraseology of our usual aesthetics" and its

¹⁹ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 37, 9.

²⁰ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 421.

²¹ Schopenhauer, *Will and Representation*, 560, 359.

²² *Ibid.*, 259.

²³ Rose Pfeffer, *Nietzsche: Disciple of Dionysus* (Lewistown: Bucknell University Press, 1972), 53.

²⁴ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 81, 80, 26, 105.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 39, 19, 17.

²⁶ Thomas Heilke, *Nietzsche's Tragic Regime* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1998), 32.

²⁷ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 26.

privileging of beauty, a symptom of “impoverished sensibility” (77, 94). It allows the “terrible or absurd in existence,” which ordinarily incites revulsion, to be transformed into “representations with which man can live; these representations are the *sublime*” (40). It is only when suffering and pain become art—when they become aesthetic “ugliness”—that pleasure can be derived from these experiences; “only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* is existence and the world eternally *justified*” (33). When put “in aesthetic terms,” the “ugly and disharmonious” produce “aesthetic delight” (113). This aesthetic pleasure is like the pleasure offered by “musical dissonance,” that is, “primal pleasure” received from pain (114).

Dionysian sexuality

Tragedy is a “development of the orgy”;²⁸ the dynamics of tragedy, as I have indicated, correspond with the drives registered in the human body, hence the precedence of tragedy in the violent practices of the Dionysian Barbarians, who illustrated the way in which “nature achieves expression as art” through their “repulsive mixture of sexuality and cruelty.”²⁹ “Bliss born of pain” is both aesthetic and sexual, “talent for suffering [...] the correlative of artistic talent.”³⁰ The sadomasochistic tone of the Dionysian aesthetic, introduced in *The Birth of Tragedy*, is intensified in *The Will to Power*. Nietzsche frames sadomasochistic sexuality as the core of the Dionysian aesthetic in his definition “*Dionysus: Sexuality and cruelty*.”³¹ In rendering “the most terrible and most questionable qualities of existence good,” the Dionysian sublime enables one to derive pleasure from “the most excruciating suffering,” demonstrating the way in which “art is the alleviation of the sufferer,—as the way to states in which pain is willed, is transfigured, is deified, where suffering is a form of great ecstasy” (416, 421, 291). Pain is always a product of power, which is crucial to the Dionysian aesthetic: power’s “necessary overflowing of all banks” characterises aesthetic perfection (244). The exertion of power is both foundation and effect of sexual pleasure—“*pleasure* appears with the feeling of power”—and indeed is so central to pleasure that it serves as an elaboration of sexuality *tout court* (403). Nietzsche’s statement “sexuality, lust of domination” suggests that “lust of domination” functions as an elaboration of “sexuality” (415); he also defines desire as “the feeling of strength” (252). Power is used to inflict pain but is also required for one to derive pleasure from pain, as one needs to be “hard enough to feel pain as pleasure,” to derive ecstasy from “self-violence” (287, 245). Nietzsche’s notion that Dionysian self-shattering characterizes sexuality in general foreshadows Bersani’s suggestion that “sexuality—at least in the mode in which it is constituted—could be thought of as a tautology for masochism,” founded as it is upon

²⁸ Raymond Geuss, “Introduction,” in Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, eds. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), xxx.

²⁹ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 20.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 27, 25.

³¹ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 415.

self-shattering “pleasurable and unpleasurable tension.”³² Nietzsche reiterates the aesthetic foundation of sadomasochistic experience in his description of “sensual ugliness” and in his claim that ugliness “excites our lust of cruelty.”³³ For Nietzsche, the sadomasochistic relation between art and power encompasses love: “when a man loves [...] he seems to himself transfigured, stronger, richer, more perfect,” and in this instance, perfection means “the extraordinary expansion of this instinct’s feeling of power.”³⁴ Love, like power, creates “a state of intoxication” (251). Nietzsche’s Dionysian sublime state is never solely a product of another’s force, but must be strived for: “it is clear that only the rarest and most lucky cases of humanity can attain to the highest and most sublime human joys [...] requiring] a long preparatory life leading to this goal.” This experience is a product of “multifarious forces and the most agile power of ‘free will’ and lordly command” (417).

The dynamics of sexual cruelty involved in Nietzsche’s aesthetics may be read in accordance with his gendered account of artistic roles. Nietzsche conceives of the role of artist as masculine and that of the art spectator as feminine, and the way in which he describes their relationship clearly evokes the dynamics of heterosexual—and heteronormative—sexual penetration. For Nietzsche, the artist, who “reaches the height of his excitement” in giving, and the spectator, who takes pleasure in receiving, are engaged in an antagonism that is both “natural” and “desirable” (255, 256). Nietzsche states that “the same difference holds good as that which exists between the sexes: one should not ask the artist who gives to become a woman—to ‘receive’” (266). Nietzsche denigrates the aesthetic philosophy of his time as a “women’s aesthetic” because it focuses solely on beauty and takes into account only “the point of view of the receivers in art.” He argues that attention should be shifted to the artist and his right to produce ugly and repulsive art, fulfilling his own desires at the expense of the receiver’s (256). This view not only reiterates the value that Nietzsche attributes to ugliness, but reveals his conception of sexual relations to be defined by the asymmetric power relations of his sadomasochistic aesthetics: the active male inflicts ugliness—the aesthetic form of pain and suffering—upon the female receiver. This notion expands upon the dynamics of sexual relations he articulates elsewhere: “woman wants to be taken, adopted as a possession, wants to be absorbed in the concept ‘possession,’ ‘possessed’; consequently, she wants someone who *takes*.”³⁵ As possessions,

³² Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 39, 34.

³³ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits. The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Volume 6, ed. Oscar Levy (New York: Gordon Press, 1974), 196; Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 245.

³⁴ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 251, 244.

³⁵ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 228. That Nietzsche’s writing qualifies as misogynist is almost a consensus within contemporary scholarship, with countless critics in agreement on the topic: “that one can paint a picture of Nietzsche as a misogynist is clear,” writes Alan D. Schrift in “On the Gynecology of Morals: Nietzsche and Cixous on the Logic of the Gift,” in *Nietzsche and the Feminine*, ed. Peter J. Burgard (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1994), 211. However, there has been an increasing number of works that aim to complicate, contextualize, apologize for, or outright refute the misogyny of this “famously misogynist philosopher.” See Rebecca Stringer, “‘A Nietzschean Breed’: Feminism, Victimology, Ressentiment” in *Why Nietzsche Still? Reflections on Drama, Culture, and Politics*, ed. Alan D. Schrift (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 259.

women are aesthetic objects: her “only artistic impulse [...] is to captivate.”³⁶ Nietzsche’s sexualized conception of beauty is echoed in the suggestive trailing in his statement “the sight of a beautiful woman . . .” which suggests that aesthetic object and erotic object are one and the same.³⁷

Semblance and representation

The Dionysian aesthetic is framed as having a connection to the metaphysical will that is closer or more authentic than the Apollonian realm of semblance: quoting almost directly from *The World as Will and Representation*, Nietzsche states that “music is not, as all the others are, a copy of appearances, but a direct copy of the Will itself, so that it represents *the metaphysical in relation to all that is physical in the world*, the thing-in-itself in relation to all appearances.”³⁸ However, the capacity for the Dionysian experience to reveal the will in all its truth is limited: Nietzsche frames both Apollo and Dionysus as expressions or representations of different truths of the will, Apollo expressing the will as beauty and individuation and Dionysus expressing the will as ugliness and, as I will shortly demonstrate, unity. The language Nietzsche uses to describe Dionysus is central to this point: in the Schopenhauerean statement quoted above, Dionysian music is a *copy* and *representation* of the will. It shatters Apollonian semblance to allow only an intuition, rather than absolute knowledge, of the will: the “enormous Dionysiac drive [...] consumes this entire world of appearances, thereby allowing us to sense, behind that world and through its destruction, a supreme, artistic, primal joy in the womb of the Primordial Unity” (105). The mirror trope that characterizes Apollonian semblance is also used to describe Dionysian music, foregrounding its status as representation: the Dionysian aesthetic offers “a general mirror of the world-Will; a vivid event refracted in this mirror expands immediately, we feel, into a copy of an eternal truth” (83). Accordingly, when Nietzsche describes the way in which Apollo is created by Dionysian need, by describing the former as “the *semblance of the semblance*,” he indicates that this category applies to the Dionysian aesthetic also (26). Thus, despite contradictory statements such as “Dionysiac art, too, wants to convince us of the eternal lust and delight of existence; but we are to seek this delight, not in appearances but behind them,” Dionysus, too, is always bound within appearance and is unable to distinguish a “behind” (80). Unlike the Apollonian realm, Dionysus acknowledges its status as representation.³⁹ Both realms are always forms of appearance defined as true only in their distinction from the other, and therefore while Nietzsche incorporates Schopenhauer’s split between will and representation in his aesthetic philosophy, he denies the possibility that the truth of the will may be known absolutely, critiquing metaphysical dualism by refusing a distinction between clear-cut

³⁶ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 261.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 247.

³⁸ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 77.

³⁹ Matthew Rampley, *Nietzsche, Aesthetics and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 101.

categories of appearance and essence, and suggesting that the two are always intertwined. This strategy is consistent with the ancient Greek conception of the physical and metaphysical, appearance and reality, as always inextricable rather than distinct.⁴⁰ Appraising *The Birth of Tragedy* in *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche declares that “the contrast of a true and of an apparent world is entirely absent here,” and states that art is posited as “more ‘divine’ than truth.”⁴¹ He also rails against the metaphysics used in *The Birth of Tragedy*, aligning metaphysics alongside “morality, religion, science” as “different forms of false.” By asserting the notion of a higher truth, metaphysics, Nietzsche declares, actually represents “a denial of ‘truth,’” the truth that there is no absolute truth (289). While *The Birth of Tragedy* is certainly steeped in metaphysical discourse—indeed, the book is aimed at showing how art is the “true *metaphysical* activity of man”⁴²—it also displays “a refusal to accept any metaphysical notions of essence or any distinctions between essence and appearance.”⁴³ This work is therefore not entirely opposed to the anti-metaphysical stance Nietzsche takes in *The Will to Power*, but may be read as a step towards it. While using the metaphysical rhetoric of appearance and essence in describing the aesthetic states of Dionysus and Apollo, Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, suggests that essence is “just another fold of skin, a surface that is made to appear as a depth.”⁴⁴ Nietzsche’s critique of metaphysical essence is also apparent in the way in which he describes the Dionysian refashioning of collective subjectivity.

“A mystical sense of oneness”

The Dionysian aesthetic expresses the ugliness of the will, the bliss of destruction and pain, by shattering Apollo’s *principium individuationis*, causing “subjectivity to vanish to the point of complete self-forgetting” and “all memories of personal experience [to] dissolve.”⁴⁵ The “breaking-asunder of the individual” is essential to aesthetic experience because “the only subjective artist we know is the bad artist and the prime demand we make of every kind and level of art is the conquest of subjectivity, release and redemption from the ‘I,’ and the falling-silent of all individual willing and desiring” (29). Of course, the Apollonian drive is also an expression of art, and therefore this statement, which speaks of Dionysian self-shattering as essential to art *per se*, suggests that Nietzsche holds the Dionysian aesthetic in higher regard than the Apollonian, or perhaps views it as definitive of aesthetic experience. This statement also highlights how the expression of the will constitutes subjectivity, and also makes clear Nietzsche’s distinction between the expression of the will as individuality—“individual willing”—

⁴⁰ Ibid., 197.

⁴¹ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 289, 292.

⁴² Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 8.

⁴³ Rampley, *Nietzsche*, 91.

⁴⁴ James I. Porter, *The Invention of Dionysus: An Essay on the Birth of Tragedy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 47.

⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 17, 40.

and the expression of the will as universality. In destroying the former, the Dionysian aesthetic creates the latter, which involves “a mystical sense of oneness” that restores the bonds between all humans (19): “now all the rigid, hostile barriers, which necessity, caprice, or “impudent fashion” have established between human beings, break asunder. Now, hearing this gospel of universal harmony, each person feels himself to be not simply united, reconciled or merged with his neighbour, but quite literally one with him, as if the veil of maya had been torn apart, so that mere shreds of it flutter before the mysterious primordial unity” (18).

How one may be refashioned as a Dionysian collective subject but still appear as an individual is explained through the figure of the lyric poet Archilochus, a Dionysian artist at “one with the primordial unity” who continually asserts his subjectivity, who “always says ‘I,’” weaving into his art his own “passions and desires” (30, 29). Archilochus invokes Apollonian semblance, transposing the “image-less and concept-less reflection of the original pain in music” into a second reflection of “a *symbolic dream-image*.” Apollonian semblance gives “sensuous expression” to Dionysian music so that the “‘I’ of the lyric poet sounds out from the deepest abyss of being; his ‘subjectivity,’ as the concept is used by modern aestheticians, is imaginary” (30). When Nietzsche specifies that “music, by its essence, cannot possibly *be* Will” but that it “*appears as Will*, understood in Schopenhauer’s sense, which is to say, in opposition to the aesthetic, purely contemplative, will-less mood,” “will” refers to the Apollonian manifestation of individual subjectivity, not the Dionysian expression of the “world-Will” (35, 83). The lyric poet maintains the semblance of individual subjectivity even though it has been shattered by the Dionysian aesthetic; “this ‘I’-ness is not the same as that of the waking, empirically real human being, but rather the only ‘I’-ness which truly exists at all, eternal and resting in the ground of things” (31). The metaphysical intuition of the will achieved through the Dionysian aesthetic means that “for brief moments we are truly the primordial being itself [...] we become one with the immeasurable, primordial delight in existence [...] we are happily alive, not as individuals, but as the *one* living being” (81). Nietzsche references his anthropomorphized nature-will figure to describe this as an “act of artistic procreation” in which one “merges fully with that original artist of the world” (33). In doing so, man “is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art,” rendered by “Nature’s artistic power” (18). In becoming “a medium, the channel” for “the one truly existing subject,” subject-object distinctions are destroyed as man is “at one and the same time subject and object, simultaneously poet, actor, and spectator” (32–3). This is an experience of “blissful ecstasy,” “sublimity,” and horror (17–18). The experience of self-shattering is horrifying, but it is sublimely pleasurable to learn that individual subjectivity is “mere appearance, and that the eternal life of the Will is not affected by his annihilation” (80).

Nietzsche’s account of becoming one with the metaphysical will through the Dionysian aesthetic suggests complete access to it, and therefore that the collective subjectivity it constructs boasts metaphysical authenticity opposing Apollonian semblance, which contradicts his stipulation that the Dionysian realm is simply another mode of representation in which essence is always bound within appearance. The notion of a “true self” lingers in *The Birth of Tragedy*, but I suggest that it is

ultimately usurped by Nietzsche's claim that complete access to metaphysical truth is impossible. Nietzsche's notion of universal subjectivity must not be conceived as the authentic self underlying appearance but as simply one possible mode of being. Claims to authenticity appear even more inappropriate when considering that Apollonian and Dionysian forms of subjectivity are simultaneously engaged in constant conflict and mutual dependence; one vies for dominance over the other but also requires the other for its own distinction, thus rendering ultimately impossible the notion of a unified, consistent, and authentic subjectivity distinguished from a "false" form. *The Birth of Tragedy*, then, introduces the notion of an unstable self that Nietzsche would go on to develop in his later works, presenting a conception of subjectivity that is "always provisional and contingent [...] open to] new interpretations of self and the world, a form of individual being which always awaits its own dissolution."⁴⁶ This theme is developed in *The Will to Power* through a focus on bodily experience.

Explosive physiology

The aesthetics of *The Will to Power* allow Nietzsche to present his "anti-metaphysical view of the world [...] but an artistic one."⁴⁷ As Rampley notes, "Nietzsche's emphasis on the body [is] a strategy in his project of countering metaphysics and its ideal of transcendence."⁴⁸ Nietzsche praises the "subtlety, power, and plenitude" of sensory perception and urges one to "hold fast to our senses, and to the belief in them—and accept their logical conclusions!"⁴⁹ Accordingly, it is the affective, bodily realm that is activated in aesthetic experience: "art reminds us of states of physical vigour," producing "strength as a feeling of dominion in the muscles" (244, 242); intoxication is an "organic function" of art, felt "on the muscles" (251, 252). Art unites humans with their animal instincts: artists become "powerful animals," the aesthetic experience characterized by "animal well-being and desire" (243). Aesthetic instincts are also sexual instincts, and indeed, the aesthetic "state of intoxication" mimics the experience of orgasm: it is "a state of explosion" producing the "pressing and compulsory desire of ridding one's self of the ecstasy of a state of tension" (251, 255). "Muscular work" is coordinated with "images, thoughts, desires," resulting in physiological "changes in colour, temperature, and secretion" (255). Nietzsche's physiological aesthetic is, as Eagleton notes, "sexualised to its root" (253).

The development of this strikingly sexual framework of aesthetic experience was driven by a reaction to what Nietzsche perceived as a tradition of reductive materialism. For Nietzsche, it was specifically the German materialist tradition that he wanted to break from, a maneuver heavily influenced by Friedrich Lange's 1866 work *Geschichte des Materialismus*.⁵⁰ The debut of Nietzsche's materialist project can be evinced in his

⁴⁶ Rampley, *Nietzsche*, 74.

⁴⁷ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 415.

⁴⁸ Rampley, *Nietzsche*, 167.

⁴⁹ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 262–3, 414.

⁵⁰ Brian Leiter, *The Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Morality* (London: Routledge, 2002); Gregory Moore, *Nietzsche, Biology and Metaphor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 35.

explication of physiologically defined aesthetic experience in *The Birth of Tragedy*, in its focus on instinctive drives and intoxication, even though this book, much to Nietzsche's later regret, is immersed in Schopenhauerean metaphysics. As Moore observes, in notes written during 1871 and 1872—the time during which *The Birth of Tragedy* was finalized and published—Nietzsche remarks that “aesthetics only has meaning as natural science: like the Apollonian and the Dionysian.”⁵¹ Although Nietzsche aimed to establish a materialism that would break with German tradition, his use of biology and physiology as the basis of aesthetic experience is firmly embedded in an intellectual tradition that was prominent in the work of eighteenth-century British materialists and was also popular with many British and German writers in Nietzsche's own time.⁵² Of course, in integrating this physiological aesthetic into his theory of Dionysian sexuality, Nietzsche was singularly original.

In expounding his revisionist materialism within *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche also tugs on the religious thread of *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche is, of course, notorious for his acerbic attacks on established faiths, particularly Christianity, although several authors have sought to illustrate the accord he shared with a variety of religions.⁵³ In *The Will to Power*, the religion that Nietzsche discusses at length is that which he uses to introduce the cult of Dionysus in *The Birth of Tragedy*, an ancient religion utterly unlike the modern religions “that promote transcendence of earthly existence in favor of eternal conditions and salvation from suffering”;⁵⁴ this form of religion shares no affinity with those he attacks elsewhere. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche describes the Dionysian state as “the feeling of religious intoxication and sexual irritability.”⁵⁵ In using such terms, Nietzsche is not positing a spiritual or transcendental experience, and he makes this clear by declaring the concept of “spirituality” to be hypocritical and deceptive, and by disparaging “that fine sieve, that thinning and mincing machine [...] which in the language of the people is termed ‘spirit’” (262, 414). What the aesthetic state offers is, rather, “an ever greater spiritualization and multiplication of the senses” in which religious ecstasy is generated within the affective body (262). Hence Nietzsche's emphasis on *feeling*: the aesthetic experience is a “feeling of religious ecstasy” (243); “the most profound instinct of life [...] is felt in a religious way.”⁵⁶ Aesthetic experience is akin to “the love of God, saintly love,” but this is “nothing but a fever which has reasons to transfigure itself—a state of intoxication.”⁵⁷ Nietzsche draws upon the discourse of religious experience while repudiating a transcendental plane, reinforcing his demand that one should cling “with ever greater joy and heartiness to the ‘things of this world’” through an account of

⁵¹ Quoted in Moore, *Metaphor*, 92.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 87.

⁵³ See, for example, Tyler T. Roberts, *Contesting Spirit: Nietzsche, Affirmation, Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); and Lawrence J. Hatab, “Apollo and Dionysus: Nietzschean Expressions of the Sacred,” in *Nietzsche and the Gods*, ed. Weaver Santaniello (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001).

⁵⁴ Hatab, “Apollo and Dionysus,” 48.

⁵⁵ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 242.

⁵⁶ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 80.

⁵⁷ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 251.

aesthetic experience as “ecstasy and rapture, demonic and delirious, a physiological rather than spiritual affair.”⁵⁸

Distortion, transformation, becoming

While repudiating the notion of metaphysical truth, clinging to one's senses through aesthetic experience does not result in a positivistic knowledge of self and world because one's experience is always subjective and distorted. With his emphasis upon the body ever-present, Nietzsche states that it is “almost impossible to be an artist without being ill” (254). The artist's “symptoms” include “partial constraint, sense hallucinations, peripheral sensitiveness,” a complete alteration in “sensations of space and time,” and “a sort of blindness and deafness towards the external world” while “the realm of admitted stimuli is sharply defined” (257, 242, 255). Distortion is central to the aesthetic experience because “artists should not see things as they are; they should see them fuller, simpler, stronger: to this end [...] a sort of perpetual elation, must be peculiar to their lives” (243); Nietzsche includes “objectivity” in his list of “inartistic states” (257). In the aesthetic state, by contrast, “the body is a series of instincts or drives that constitute reality as they interpret it,” rendering the artist's experience of the world a hallucinatory, contingent, and subjective construction.⁵⁹ One's experience of the world is just as unstable as one's experience of self: the Dionysian subject has “the power to represent, reproduce, transfigure, transform, every kind of mime and play-acting [...] he adopts every skin, every emotion: he is constantly transforming himself.”⁶⁰ Nietzsche's emphasis on aesthetic experience as a purely bodily phenomenon refutes the notion of metaphysical truth but does not posit a fixed reality or truth in the material world, instead suggesting that these concepts are constituted by subjective sensory experience. Nietzsche's “intertwining of erotics and aesthetics” serves to destroy “the idea of art as a revelation of truth, either positivist or transcendent.”⁶¹

Nietzsche's physiological aesthetic is encompassed within his theory of becoming. Becoming, the “desire for destruction, for change, for novelty, for future,” is pitted against the “desire for fixing, for immortalizing, for *being*.” That is, the notion that existence and subjectivity is constructed through continual change challenges an absolutist or essentialist account of existence.⁶² Becoming encompasses the notion that “‘truth’ is not something which is present and which has to be found and discovered; it is something *which has to be created* and which *gives* its name to a process.”⁶³ The continuous cycle of creation and destruction of truth and being central to this process

⁵⁸ Ibid., 263; Eagleton, *Ideology*, 253.

⁵⁹ Eric Blondel, *Nietzsche: The Body and Culture, Philosophy as a Philological Genealogy*, trans. Séan Hand (London: The Athlone Press, 1991), 206.

⁶⁰ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols, or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, trans. Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 48.

⁶¹ Rampley, *Nietzsche*, 212.

⁶² Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 235.

⁶³ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 60.

is a theme woven throughout Nietzsche's account of the Dionysian aesthetic: the "tragico-Dionysian state" is "the will to Becoming, to growth, to forming, *i.e.*, to creating; in creating, however, destruction is included" (291). Nietzsche's description of "the joy of procreative and destructive force" is an elaboration of his definition "*Dionysus: Sexuality and cruelty*," and elsewhere Nietzsche defines "Dionysus" as "the desire for *destruction*, for change and for becoming."⁶⁴ By embracing the destruction inherent in life by procuring intensely lived experience from death and pain, Nietzsche's sadomasochistic aesthetic defines the world and the self as unstable and contingent, produced through a process of destruction and creation, as becoming rather than being. The perpetual processes of destruction and creation are also apparent in *The Birth of Tragedy*, playing out through the simultaneously destructive and productive antagonism of the Apollonian and Dionysian drives and the mode of subjectivity instated in each. Nietzsche highlights how the foundation of his theory of becoming is apparent in this work: in describing "the eternal joy of becoming—that joy which also encompasses the *joy of destruction*," Nietzsche states that he is "touching on the point from which I once started out—the *Birth of Tragedy* was my first revaluation of all values."⁶⁵ Nietzsche's starting point, illustrated in *The Birth of Tragedy*, and the position he arrives at in *The Will to Power*, serve, as I demonstrate in the next two chapters, as the foundation of the violent sexual aesthetic experience in *L'Érotisme*, *Histoire de l'œil*, *Histoire d'O*, and *L'image*.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 415, Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 235.

⁶⁵ Nietzsche, *Twilight*, 81.

Tragic self-shattering II: delirious materialism in Bataille's *L'Érotisme* and *Histoire de L'œil*

The sadomasochistic slant of the French avant-garde: Sade and surrealism

The prominence of sadomasochistic themes within French avant-garde literature during the mid twentieth century is, for the main part, indebted to the intellectual rediscovery of Sade, sparked by Iwan Bloch's 1904 publication of Sade's *Les 120 journées de Sodome*, the manuscript thought to have been destroyed when the Bastille was stormed in 1789. One of the earliest traces of Sade's twentieth-century European popularity and influence can be found in Guillaume Apollinaire's 1907 novella *Les onze mille verges*, which, in addressing the Russo-Japanese war, mimics Sade's strategy of depicting violent sexuality as a means of political critique. The novel also parodies Sade's work, ironically employing his favored themes of eroticized flagellation and murder, as well as imagery of genitals that move "comme un piston."¹ One of the recurring Sadean formulations in *Les onze mille verges*, the orgasm that coincides with death, would also become a significant theme in Bataille's *œuvre*. Apollinaire went on to publish *L'Œuvre du Marquis de Sade* in 1909, a volume comprising Sade's major novels and novellas as well as his unpublished letters. In the work's introductory essay, Apollinaire describes Sade as the "esprit le plus libre qui ait encore existé" and argues that his work, in revealing cruel and wild impulses to be fundamental drives in human nature, advocates freedom from the oppression of bourgeois morality.² Apollinaire set the tone for a spate of biographical texts published in the 1920s and 1930s by writers such as Maurice Heine, Mark Amiaux, and Jean Desbordes, who interpreted Sade's

¹ John Phillips, *Forbidden Fictions: Pornography and Censorship in Twentieth-Century French Literature* (London: Pluto Press, 1999), 27; Guillaume Apollinaire, *Œuvres de Guillaume Apollinaire V: Les onze mille verges* (Paris: André Sauret, 1984), 40; "like a piston."

² Guillaume Apollinaire, ed., *Les Maîtres de l'amour: l'œuvre du Marquis de Sade* (Paris: Bibliothèque des curieux, 1909), 17; "most freest spirit who has yet existed."

sexual architecture as a reflection of the normal dynamics of sexuality and society.³ The 1940s and 1950s saw new editions of Sade's work published by Jean-Jacques Pauvert and Gilbert Lély, as well as redeeming literary criticism by Simone de Beauvoir. The intense interest in Sade during this time was largely contained within France, although from Britain came an essay, "The Marquis de Sade, a Study in Algolagnia" (1920) by Montague Summers; a biography, *The Marquis de Sade: His Life and Works* (1927) by C. R. Dawes, which largely imitates an earlier biography by Bloch; and a critical monograph, *The Revolutionary Ideas of the Marquis de Sade* (1934) by Geoffrey Gorer.⁴ No signs of interest in Sade were displayed within the United States before the 1960s, when Grove Press published his major works in an unfaithful, freewheeling, and highly embellished English translation.

The idealized and idolizing conception of Sade adopted by his French and British biographers was also evident among the French surrealists, who posited Sade as a "novel, virtuous, and innocent victim" suffering condemnation for the painful truths he dared to proclaim.⁵ Declared a forerunner of surrealism, a man of "parfaite intégrité" in life and work, as André Breton maintained, Sade "became the divine Marquis [...] a canonical figure of revolt."⁶ With surrealism's favored methods of aesthetic production, such as automatic writing and free association, its proponents aimed to tap into humanity's "somasochistic drive" in an effort to grasp authenticity and enable a "revolt of desire against bourgeois morality."⁷

Surrealism piqued the interest of George Bataille in 1924; his involvement with the movement would remain fraught throughout the ensuing decades and yet was pivotal to his intellectual and creative output. The formulation of somasochistic eroticism, or violent sexuality, that he offers in *L'Érotisme* can be read as both absorbing surrealist ideals and reacting to what Bataille perceived as the movement's limitations. Bataille initially involved himself enthusiastically with Parisian surrealists such as Antonin Artaud, Jacques Baron, and Robert Desnos. With André Masson he shared an appreciation of Nietzsche and Greek myth, both influences proving central to the somasochistic tone of his works on eroticism.⁸ However, in 1929, following persistent conflict with Breton, Bataille condemned surrealism as idealistic and was expelled from the group. Despite being ideologically opposed to Breton's brand of surrealism, Bataille had absorbed many philosophical and aesthetic approaches and his ensuing projects retained a surrealist edge, particularly in the themes that would focus his work on eroticism, such as myth, mysticism, and anti-rationalism.⁹ These orthodox surrealist

³ Carolyn J. Dean, *The Self and Its Pleasures: Bataille, Lacan, and the History of the Decentered Subject* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 131.

⁴ Hobart Ryland, "Recent Developments in Research on the Marquis de Sade," *The French Review* 25, no. 1 (1951): 15.

⁵ Dean, *Self and its Pleasures*, 152, 131.

⁶ André Breton, *Second Manifeste du Surréalisme* (Paris: Éditions Kra, 1930), 80; Peter Cryle, "Beyond the Canonical Sade," *Paragraph* 23, no. 1 (2001): 18; "perfect integrity."

⁷ Dean, *Self and its Pleasures*, 214.

⁸ Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 2002), 74–5.

⁹ Roland A. Champagne, *Georges Bataille* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), 88.

values are displayed at the core of *L'Érotisme*, published ten years after Bataille officially realigned himself with the movement. In detailing an experience that fuses ecstasy and degradation, life and death, the work echoes a primary surrealist principle that Breton expounded in his *Second manifeste du surréalisme* of 1930, that is, to resolve the oppositional categories of “la vie et la mort, le réel et l’imaginaire, le passé et le futur, le communicable et l’incommunicable, le haut et le bas.”¹⁰ However, *L'Érotisme* also evinces a response to Bataille’s criticisms of surrealism. In his 1930 essay “La valeur d’usage de D.A.F. de Sade (Lettre ouverte à mes camarades actuels),” Bataille criticizes Sade’s “apologistes les plus ouverts,” stating that their celebratory appropriation only ascribes the writer validity “en dehors et au-dessus de toute réalité” and refuses to recognize the relevance of Sadean principles to everyday life, “aussi bien dans la vie privée que dans la vie sociale, aussi bien dans la théorie que dans la pratique.”¹¹ Key Sadean principles, primarily the proximity posed between sex and death, prove integral to Bataille’s work, which, in giving value to man’s animalistic and base qualities, also counters what Bataille saw as surrealism’s idealization of humanity. Rather than “elevating the ideal or the already accepted,” as he accused Breton of doing, *L'Érotisme* revels in “the horribly excluded.”¹²

Ideas in circulation

The themes and concepts underscoring Bataille’s construction of violent sexuality were developed through various collaborative projects he undertook during the 1930s and through the influence of his friends and colleagues. In 1933, Bataille met Pierre Klossowski, and two years later they formed the anti-fascist organization *Contre-Attaque*, which operated “under the triple signs of Sade, Fourier and Nietzsche.”¹³ Klossowski would also work with Bataille on the journal *Acéphale*, launched in 1936, along with Masson, Jean Wahl, and Roger Caillois. Klossowski, Wahl, Jean Paulhan, and Alexandre Kojève were among those who lectured for the *Collège de sociologie*, a program Bataille launched in 1937 with Caillois and Michel Leiris. During its two years of operation, the *Collège de sociologie* attracted to its audience intellectuals such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Walter Benjamin. The lectures delivered here explored the concepts of sacred transgression and profane prohibition, principles that would prove pivotal to Bataille’s *L'Érotisme*. The work’s themes also approach those underscoring Klossowski’s *Sade mon prochain*, first published in 1947. Klossowski argues that in Sade’s novels, transgression of cultural norms leads “des forces impulsives”

¹⁰ Breton, *Second Manifeste*, 10; “life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, the high and the low.”

¹¹ Georges Bataille, “La valeur d’usage de D. A. F. de Sade (Lettre ouverte à mes camarades actuels),” in *Œuvres complètes II, Écrits posthumes 1922–1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 55–6; “most open apologists”; “outside and above of all reality”; “in private life as in social life, in theory as in practice.”

¹² Louise Tythacott, *Surrealism and the Exotic* (London: Routledge, 2003), 218.

¹³ Surya, *Bataille*, 222.

to disintegrate the conscience and cast one “*hors de soi*.”¹⁴ A similar notion is presented in Blanchot’s essay “Lautréamont et Sade,” published in 1949, in which Blanchot discusses Sade’s dual life-affirming and life-negating drives.¹⁵ That Blanchot and Bataille approached certain ideas sympathetically is likely as the pair became friends in 1940 and worked together on *Critique*, a journal Bataille launched in 1946. The ideas addressed by Blanchot and Klossowski would also be considered in a 1951 essay, “Le Marquis de Sade et sa complice” by Jean Paulhan. In describing Sade as an author inspired by “ces redoutables fêtes primitives,” with “ces grandes dilapidations de forces et ces dépenses de vie,” Paulhan alludes to the ancient festivals of Dionysus, which Bataille uses as a foundation of his notion of violent sexuality.¹⁶ The literary criticism of Paulhan, Klossowski, and Blanchot signals a shift from the earlier celebration of Sade’s iconoclastic and revolutionary significance to his representation of a “drive to self-liquidation” and “a new kind of selfhood rooted paradoxically in a desire for selflessness.”¹⁷

Variations of this concept can not only be seen in Bataille’s *L’Érotisme* but also in *Histoire d’O* (1954) by Pauline Réage (a pseudonym used by the writer born as Anne Desclos and popularly known, from 1937, as Dominique Aury). Sharing the same publisher as Bataille and Sade—Jean-Jacques Pauvert—*Histoire d’O* features a protagonist who, as we shall see in the following chapter, experiences sexuality in a manner that coheres with the principles Bataille would espouse more formally three years after the publication of Réage’s novel. *Histoire d’O* was celebrated by the literary avant-garde, who acknowledged its Sadean traces and no doubt recognized its surrealist themes of physical dissolution and spiritual ascension. The novel was praised in reviews by the surrealist André Pieyre de Mandiargues in Bataille’s journal *Critique* and by Bataille himself in the journal *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, which was at that time edited by Paulhan. For Bataille, *Histoire d’O* revealed nothing less than eroticism’s essential paradox: he stated, somewhat obscurely, that “l’érotisme d’*Histoire d’O* est aussi l’impossibilité de l’érotisme [...] Le paradoxe d’O est celui de la visionnaire qui mourait de ne pas mourir, c’est le martyr où le bourreau est le complice de la victime. Ce livre est le dépassement de la parole qui est en lui, dans la mesure où, à lui seul, il se déchire, où il résout la fascination de l’érotisme dans la fascination plus grande de l’impossible. De l’impossible qui n’est pas seulement celui de la mort, mais celui d’une solitude qui se ferme absolument.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Pierre Klossowski, *Sade mon prochain* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967), 41; “impulsive forces”; “outside of oneself.”

¹⁵ Maurice Blanchot, *Lautréamont et Sade, avec le texte intégral des Chants de Maldoror* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1963).

¹⁶ Jean Paulhan, *Le Marquis de Sade et sa complice* (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 1987), 37; “these formidable primitive festivals”; “these massive squanderings of energy and these expenditures of life.”

¹⁷ Dean, *Self and its Pleasures*, 178, 196.

¹⁸ Georges Bataille, “Le Paradoxe de l’érotisme,” *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française* 29 (1955): 838–9; “the eroticism of *Histoire d’O* is also the impossibility of eroticism [...] The paradox of O is that of the visionary who died from not dying, it is the martyrdom in which the torturer is the accomplice of the victim. This book goes beyond the language that is in it, in so far as, on its own, it tears itself, in which it resolves the fascination for eroticism through the greater fascination for the impossible. For the impossibility that is not only that of death, but that of a solitude which absolutely closes.”

Winning the prestigious *Prix des Deux Magots* literary prize, *Histoire d'O* quickly became a classic work of erotic literature. For Catherine Robbe-Grillet, *Histoire d'O* was “une révélation, cela fit éclat.”¹⁹ Robbe-Grillet—who was at the time Catherine Rstakian—would, in 1956 under the pseudonym “Jean de Berg,” write a sadomasochistic novella entitled *L'image*. Published by *Les Éditions de Minuit*, which also published Bataille's *L'Érotisme*, *L'image* employed many of the central themes and tropes of *Histoire d'O*. The work also jestingly plays on the identity scandal caused by the pseudonymous Pauline Réage: its preface was signed with the initials “P. R.,” and the novel's English translation still erroneously lists the author of the preface as Pauline Réage. The preface's author was, in fact, Alain Robbe-Grillet, who Rstakian would marry in the year following the book's publication.²⁰ The name of the novel's submissive participant, Anne, is a nod to the Christian name Réage was born with, and the pseudonym “Jean,” which is also the name of the work's dominant male narrator, is the Christian name of Réage's lover Paulhan, for whom, it is well known, Réage wrote *Histoire d'O*. Such references are not surprising considering the extremely close milieu these authors inhabited, their writing very familiar to each other. During the 1950s, *La Nouvelle Revue française*, for example, often featured works by Bataille, Paulhan, Réage (under the name Aury) and Alain Robbe-Grillet, Catherine's husband, in the same edition. While *Histoire d'O* was born from fantasies that remained as such, the sadomasochistic practice detailed within *L'image* was, in addition to *Histoire d'O* and other possible literary and philosophical influences, informed by personal experience. Robbe-Grillet was initiated into this style of sexual practice at the age of twenty by Alain.²¹ At the time *L'image* was published, the work was, as Robbe-Grillet states, “une fiction que j'ai vécue des années plus tard. A ce moment-là, je n'étais pas dans le rôle d'Anne mais dans le rôle de Claire,” Claire being one of the novella's main dominant figures.²²

Nietzsche: a shared inspiration

The pivotal foundations of Bataille's work on sexuality can be traced specifically to Nietzsche's aesthetic theory. Bataille began reading Nietzsche in 1922 under the tutelage of Léon Chestov, who, having published a book entitled *La Philosophie de la tragédie: Dostoïevski et Nietzsche* in 1903, was an expert on Nietzsche's aesthetic tome. There are several indicators that Bataille was particularly interested in the concepts relayed in Nietzsche's first book. In *Sur Nietzsche*, Bataille praises “*l'Origine de la tragédie*” for

¹⁹ Catherine Robbe-Grillet, interviewed by Alexandra Destais, *Entretien Catherine Robbe-Grillet. Château Mesnil au-grain, 20 avril 2005, 15 heures*, 2, <http://alexandra-destais.fr/pdf/Entretien%20avec%20Catherine%20Robbe-Grillet.pdf>; “a revelation, it was like lightening.”

²⁰ Angie David, *Dominique Aury* (Paris: Éditions Léo Scheer, 2006), 137.

²¹ Richard Gaitet, “Mme Robbe-Grillet: ‘La Recherche D'un Trouble,’” *Standard* (7 July 2009), <http://www.standardmagazine.com/catherine-robbe-grillet/>.

²² Robbe-Grillet, *Entretien Catherine Robbe-Grillet*, 3; “a fiction that I lived years later. At that moment, I was not in the role of Anne but in the role of Claire.”

evoking “du néant,” and the influence of this text is clearly apparent in Bataille’s declaration that “pour étrange que cela soit, la *douleur est si rare* que nous devons recourir à l’art *afin de n’en pas manquer*,” and in his claim that one can “passer tout à fait, *si nous l’acceptons*, de la transcendance du dehors. C’est trop peu de dire, il est vrai: *si nous l’acceptons*, il faut aller plus loin, *si nous l’aimons*, si nous avons la force de l’aimer.”²³ In the third edition of *Acéphale*, Bataille distinguishes fascism from “le dionysisme nietzschéen,” and also refers to “l’existence elle-même, L’EXISTENCE, C’EST-À-DIRE LA TRAGÉDIE.”²⁴ The theme of Dionysus remained pertinent at the *Collège de sociologie*, particularly in the lectures of 1938. On 19 March of that year, Bataille delivered a lecture written by Caillois that discusses how the sacred realm, which involves “l’extase collective et la mort paroxystique,” is encapsulated in the notion of tragedy, which “est issue des confréries dionysiaques,” and in May, Klossowski and Denis de Rougemont gave a lecture simply titled “Tragédie.”²⁵ In *L’Érotisme*, Bataille alludes to the underlying framework of this text by tracing the fusion of sexual and divine intoxication to the Ancient Greek “fêtes de Dionysos,” and in *Les larmes d’Éros*, a 1961 work reiterating many of the themes of *L’Érotisme*, Bataille describes the depth of eroticism’s contradictions by stating that “elle est horrible, elle est tragique.”²⁶ That Bataille founds his notions of prohibition and transgression on Nietzsche’s aesthetic drives of Apollo and Dionysus is underscored by a lecture he delivered at the *Collège de sociologie* on 5 February, 1938, in which he analyzes Nietzsche’s articulation of tragedy as both horrifying and attractive. Bataille states that “l’objet de la tragédie est tout d’abord un crime qui consiste dans la rupture d’un tabou—qui consiste par conséquent dans la rupture de la barrière de répulsion qui protège les choses sacrées. Il est raisonnable d’admettre qu’une telle rupture peut avoir un effet dynamique brutal.”²⁷ Here, Bataille indicates that he conceives of the breaking of the taboo, which he would later refer to as “l’interdit,” or the prohibition—that is, transgression, the realm of the sacred—to be the essence of tragedy.

Besides Nietzsche, the other well known intellectual influence upon Bataille was, of course, Hegel. Bataille provides a telling account of his interpretation of Hegel in his

²³ Georges Bataille, “Sur Nietzsche,” in *Œuvres complètes VI* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 158; “the Origin of tragedy”; “nothingness”; “for as strange as it is, *pain is so rare* that we must appeal to art *in order to not lack it*; “completely do without transcendence from the outside, if we [...] *accept* [the nothingness of suffering]. This is an understatement, it’s true: *if we accept it*, it is necessary to go further, *if we love it*, if we have the strength to love it.”

²⁴ Georges Bataille, “Chronique nietzschéenne,” in *Œuvres complètes I, Premiers Écrits 1922–1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 483, 482; “Nietzschean Dionysianism”; “existence itself, EXISTENCE, THAT IS TO SAY, TRAGEDY.”

²⁵ Georges Bataille, “19 mars 1938,” in *Œuvres complètes II, Écrits posthumes 1922–1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 361; “collective ecstasy and paroxysmal death”; “is the product of the Dionysian brotherhoods”; “tragedy.”

²⁶ Georges Bataille, *L’Érotisme* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2011), 119; Georges Bataille, “Les larmes d’Éros,” in *Œuvres complètes X* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 608; “Dionysian festivals”; “it’s horrible, it’s tragic.”

²⁷ Georges Bataille, “5 février 1938,” in *Œuvres complètes II, Écrits posthumes 1922–1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 331; “the object of tragedy is first of all a crime that consists in the rupture of a taboo—that consists, consequently, in the rupture of the barrier of repulsion that protects sacred things. It is reasonable to admit that such a rupture can have a brutally dynamic effect.”

1955 essay “Hegel, la mort et le sacrifice.” In Hegel, Bataille understands, it is in death that man realizes his humanity, his difference from animality;²⁸ this formulation corresponds with Bataille’s stance, as it is laid out in *L’Érotisme*, that it is death-driven, identity-shattering eroticism that distinguishes man from animal. However, even though Hegel, like Nietzsche, understood Greek tragedy to center upon the death of the individual, Hegel maintained that the shattered being then entered into a spiritual realm and, at the same time, into self-consciousness.²⁹ Nietzsche opposes this idea when, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, he writes that the shattering of the individual also means the annihilation of self-consciousness, and it is this Nietzschean notion that is evident in Bataille’s *L’Érotisme*. Ultimately, Hegel’s “tradition judéo-chrétienne,” and his conception of man as “un être spirituel,” distances Hegel not only from “la philosophie grecque,” as Bataille declares, but also from Nietzsche’s vehemently anti-Christian conception of Greek myth as Bataille understood it.³⁰ Thus, although Bataille’s conception of eroticism may bear traces of Hegelian influence, it is specifically Nietzsche’s exposition on Greek tragedy that most fully informs Bataille’s thinking on this subject.

Réage’s literary influences are well known: eighteenth-century libertine literature, including that of Sade, seventeenth-century religious poetry, and classic English literature. Her philosophical influences are not documented, although it may be reasonably assumed that she was at least familiar with those of her romantic partners. Before her affair with Paulhan, in 1933 Réage became the lover of Jacques Talagrand, for whom she eventually left her husband. In the same year, under his pseudonym Thierry Maulnier, Talagrand published a celebrated book on Nietzsche, “le philosophe qu’il admire le plus.”³¹ Talagrand’s favorite philosopher was also a figure of great interest for Paulhan, with whom Réage would become passionately involved after her eventual break with Talagrand. In 1926, Paulhan, who had read Nietzsche since his late teens, translated two lectures Nietzsche delivered in 1870, the content of which would form the basis of *The Birth of Tragedy*.³² The concepts Paulhan translated were clearly influential: the aesthetic realms of Apollo and Dionysus would color Paulhan’s *Les Fleurs de Tarbes ou la terreur dans les lettres* (1936), and I suggest that they also underscore the work of Réage.³³ Similarly, it is possible that the author of *L’image* may have appreciated the philosophers admired by her husband. That Alain Robbe-Grillet was well acquainted with Nietzsche’s philosophy of tragedy is evident in his 1958 essay “Nature, humanisme, tragédie,” in which he provides his own interpretation of and use for Nietzsche’s concept:

²⁸ Georges Bataille, “Hegel, la mort et le sacrifice,” in *Œuvres complètes XII* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 336.

²⁹ Christopher M. Gemberchak, *The Sunday of the Negative: Reading Bataille Reading Hegel* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 214.

³⁰ Bataille, “Hegel,” 329; “Judeo-Christian tradition”; “a spiritual being”; “Greek philosophy.”

³¹ David, *Dominique Aury*, 205; “the philosopher he admires the most.”

³² Anna-Louise Milne, “Jean Paulhan’s Commonplace: the Genealogy of a Concept” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1999), 261.

³³ *Ibid.*, 263.

Partout où il y a une distance, une séparation, un dédoublement, un clivage, il y a possibilité de les ressentir comme souffrance, puis d'élever cette souffrance à la hauteur d'une sublime nécessité [*sic*]. Chemin vers un au-delà métaphysique, cette pseudo-nécessité est en même temps la porte fermée à tout avenir réaliste. La tragédie, si elle nous console aujourd'hui, interdit toute conquête plus solide pour demain. Sous l'apparence d'un perpétuel mouvement, elle fige au contraire l'univers dans une malédiction ronronnante. Il n'est plus question de recherche quelque remède à notre malheur, du moment qu'elle vise à nous le faire aimer.³⁴

Nietzsche's *La Naissance de la tragédie*, as it was often translated, was clearly *en vogue* within this avant-garde literary circle, whose output illuminates the volume's sadomasochistic tone.

Eyeing off Apollo

My examination of Bataille's thought on eroticism and sexuality focuses upon the work *L'Érotisme*, which is written as a sociological study. However, Nietzschean tropes, particularly Apollonian symbolism, are also evinced in the early work *Histoire de l'œil* (1928), which, weaving into fiction the theory Bataille would elaborate many years later in *L'Érotisme*, depicts the erotic as that which transgresses prohibitions and centers upon death, violence, and the abject. In responding to the aesthetic theory of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, *Histoire de l'œil* makes particular use of the sun/eye trope, which Nietzsche initially associates with the Apollonian realm, stating that the eye of the "image-making god [...] must be 'sun-like,'" and then with the Dionysian absence of subjectivity: the lyric poet, "completely set free from the greed of the Will, is a pure, unclouded sun-eye."³⁵ *Histoire de l'œil* suggests an Apollonian aesthetic in its continual reference to apparitions and hallucinations. The narrator's observation that "à d'autres l'univers paraît honnête. Il semble honnête aux honnêtes gens parce qu'ils ont des yeux châtrés" suggests the Nietzschean notion that a Dionysian realm of ugliness underlies the visual illusion of beauty.³⁶ The Apollonian trope of visual semblance is completed by reference to the sun: watching a bullfight, the narrator states that "le rayonnement solaire, à la longue, nous absorbait dans une irréalité conforme à notre malaise [...] Le visage grimaçant sous l'effet du soleil [...] nous partageons cette déliquescence

³⁴ Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Nature, humanisme, tragédie," in *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1961), 55; "everywhere where there is a distance, a separation, a splitting, a division, there is the possibility of feeling these as suffering, then elevating this suffering to the height of a sublime necessity. A path towards a metaphysical beyond, this pseudo-necessity is at the same time the closed door to every realist future. Tragedy, if it consoles us today, forbids every more solid conquest for tomorrow. On the contrary, under the appearance of a perpetual movement, it congeals the universe in a droning curse. It is no longer a question of searching for some remedy to our misfortune from the moment that [tragedy] aims to make us love it."

³⁵ Nietzsche, *Tragedy*, 16, 36.

³⁶ Georges Bataille, *Histoire de l'œil* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), 62; "to others, the universe appears honest. It seems honest to honest people because they have castrated eyes."

morose.”³⁷ The shattering of Apollonian semblance is suggested with the recurring theme of destroyed eyes. The destruction of the eye, coupled with the sun metaphor, is demonstrated when the narrator and his lover Simone view the impaling of a matador: “sur cette balustrade les cornes à la volée frappèrent trois coups: l’une des cornes enfonça l’œil droit et la tête. La clameur atterrée des arènes coïncida avec le spasme de Simone. Soulevée de la dalle de pierre, elle chancela et tomba, le soleil l’aveuglait, elle saignait du nez. Quelques hommes se précipitèrent, s’emparèrent de Granero [...] L’œil droit du cadavre pendait.”³⁸

The eye, as ffrrench notes, is the “locus of identity,”³⁹ and the rupture of the eye signifies the rupture of identity; that the shattering of Apollonian semblance means the ecstatic shattering of the individual is demonstrated in Simone’s orgasm. Prior to Granero’s impaling, it becomes clear that orgasm signifies the dissolution of the individual self when Simone and the narrator, aroused by the death of a bull, a “monstre solaire,” have sex to experience an orgasm that “nous cassant les reins, nous entre-déchira.”⁴⁰ Simone deliriously anticipates the bullfight scene when, asked by the narrator what she associates with the term “uriner,” she chants “*buriner*, les yeux, avec un rasoir,” a fantasy that would be depicted in the year following the publication of *Histoire de l’œil* in the film *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí.⁴¹ It has been suggested that the blinding of the eye—its function as “not-eye”—signifies eroticism’s fusion of life and death, and I would suggest that it also signifies the rupture of isolated individuality and the consequent fusion of beings, the sublime aesthetic experience outlined by Nietzsche.⁴² This fusion, and its signification in the eye symbol, culminates in the final scene of the novella, in which Simone, having raped and murdered a priest, inserts his gouged eye into her vagina. The narrator describes this image and its effect: “mes yeux, me semblait-il, étaient érectiles à force d’horreur; je vis, dans la vulve velue de Simone, l’œil bleu pâle de Marcelle me regarder en pleurant des larmes d’urine. Des traînées de foutre dans le poil fumant achevaient de donner à cette vision un caractère de tristesse douloureuse.”⁴³ This sadness is an effect of tragedy, for this passage conveys the fusion of beings achieved through the rupture of the eye and hence the rupture of individuality. United in the “oneness” found in death are Marcelle and the priest, who, so to speak, share an eye—and thus an “I,” an identity—and Simone, who, embodying this eye, accesses the fusion of subjectivity through her transgressive

³⁷ Ibid., 78; “the solar radiation eventually absorbed us into an unreality fitting our malaise [...] our faces grimacing under the effect of the sun [...] we shared this morose degeneration.”

³⁸ Ibid., 70; “upon this balustrade the horns suddenly struck three blows: one of the horns thrust through the right eye and the head [of Granero]. The dismayed clamor of the arenas coincided with Simone’s orgasm. Flung from the stone slab, she staggered and fell, blinded by the sun, her nose bled. Several men dashed out and seized Granero [...] The right eye of the cadaver dangled out.”

³⁹ Patrick ffrrench, *The Cut: Reading Bataille’s Histoire de l’œil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2.

⁴⁰ Bataille, *Histoire de l’œil*, 75, 76; “solar monster”; “shattering our loins, tore us apart.”

⁴¹ Ibid., 50–1; “to urinate”; “to chisel, the eyes, with a razor.”

⁴² Rina Arya, “The Role of Objects in Bataille’s *Story of the Eye*,” *Performance Research* 12, no. 4 (2007): 71.

⁴³ Bataille, *Histoire de l’œil*, 99; “My eyes, it seemed to me, were erectile with horror; I saw, in Simone’s hairy vulva, the pale blue eye of Marcelle watching me while crying tears of urine. Streaks of come in the steaming hair finished by giving this vision an air of painful sadness.”

eroticism. Simone's streaks of come and the narrator's own "erectile" eyes reiterate that this process of self-shattering and fusion is one of *jouissance*.

In his influential essay, Barthes notes that the eye is signified in the other globular objects in *Histoire de l'œil*, such as eggs and testicles.⁴⁴ The destruction of these eye-like symbols also produces profound pleasure for Simone, as the narrator recounts: when an egg "fit naufrage sous nos yeux" in the toilet bowl, she "jouit longuement" while "buvant mon œil entre ses lèvres."⁴⁵ Simone has a desire "de casser des œufs en l'air, au soleil, à coups de revolver" and chatters deliriously, "disant tantôt *casser un œil*, tantôt *crever un œuf*."⁴⁶

The destruction of closed subjectivity and the unity of beings achieved through the rupture of these figures are also reflected in the constant subjection of the eye and eye-like objects to the trope of liquefaction; the event of liquefaction achieves "the movement of contiguity between the objects whose roundness signifies their being limited. Liquefaction transgresses and ruins those limits."⁴⁷ This trope signifies the liquefaction, the dissolution, of contained, isolated individuality, which leads to the fusion of all beings. Challenging the suggestion that "*Histoire de l'œil* is no tragedy,"⁴⁸ I maintain that the themes of continuity and discontinuity are worked through the Apollonian and Dionysian tropes of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, a work alluded to in the "délire tragi-comique" of a violent orgy and the "délire tragique" that envelops the ravishment of the unfortunate Marcelle.⁴⁹

Tragic transgression in *L'Érotisme*

Although quietly present in *Histoire de l'œil*, the influence of *The Birth of Tragedy* is most fully developed in *L'Érotisme*. By suggesting that eroticism has "le même privilège que la poésie," that is, "à l'indistinction, à la confusion des objets distincts. Elle nous mène à l'éternité [...] à la continuité," and indeed, in asking "de l'érotisme à la poésie, ou de l'érotisme à l'extase, la différence est-elle décidément saisissable?" Bataille sets up an extremely close rapport between eroticism and aesthetics, establishing the former as an aesthetic experience.⁵⁰ The aesthetic experience of eroticism is initiated by a particular

⁴⁴ Roland Barthes, "The Metaphor of the Eye," in *Story of the Eye*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), 121.

⁴⁵ Bataille, *Histoire de l'œil*, 50; "was shipwrecked before our eyes"; "had a long orgasm"; "drinking my eye between her lips."

⁴⁶ Ibid., 51; "to break eggs in the air, in the sun, with shots from the revolver"; "saying sometimes to *break an eye*, sometimes to *burst an egg*."

⁴⁷ French, *The Cut*, 95.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 127.

⁴⁹ Bataille, *Histoire de l'œil*, 22; Georges Bataille, *Histoire de l'œil*, in *Œuvres complètes I, Premiers Écrits 1922–1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 25; "tragicomical delirium"; "tragic delirium." The latter phrase appears only in the first edition of *Histoire de l'œil*, published in 1928 with an extremely limited print run by René Bonnel. A second version of the work, which is today the most widely distributed, was published in 1947 and 1951.

⁵⁰ Bataille, *L'Érotisme*, 165, 29; Bataille, "Les larmes," 576; "the same privilege as poetry"; "the blurring, the confusion of distinct objects. It leads us to eternity [...] to continuity"; "from eroticism to poetry, or from eroticism to ecstasy, is the difference perceptible?"

aesthetic object, which introduces a productive tension in Bataille's thought on the subject: eroticism, "qui déplace l'intérêt dans le sens d'un dépassement de l'être personnel et de toute limite, est pourtant exprimé par un objet. Nous sommes devant ce paradoxe: devant un objet significatif de la négation des limites de tout objet, devant *un objet érotique*."⁵¹ This erotic object is woman, who focuses Bataille's study of "le rôle de la beauté dans l'érotisme."⁵² Bataille's woman, as Guerlac notes, is both erotic object and "work of art,"⁵³ characterized by an inherently sexualized, and in this respect Nietzschean, form of beauty. In accordance with the dynamics of Nietzsche's gendered aesthetics, Bataille argues that female aesthetic/erotic objects excite male pursuit, not because they are necessarily more beautiful than men, but because of their passivity, or receptiveness: they "se proposent comme des objets au désir agressif des hommes."⁵⁴ The desire that this passive object incites in the active male produces the aesthetic experience of eroticism, which is defined in contrast with, but nevertheless requires, the realm of prohibition.

The experiences of prohibition and transgression, which compose Bataille's conception of eroticism, incorporate the characteristics of Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian artistic drives. The realm of the prohibition is the realm of Apollonian individuality, in which humans are defined as "des êtres discontinus [...] Chaque être est distinct de tous les autres [...] Lui seul naît. Lui seul meurt. Entre un être et un autre, il y a un abîme, il y a une discontinuité" (14).⁵⁵ The feelings of isolation and discontinuity, which constitute one's feeling of self, are those of misery, the rift between humans marked by "la solidité, la tristesse et l'hostilité d'un mur de prison" (107, 106).⁵⁶ Discontinuity is, however, something of a necessary evil, being essential to man's ability to work, as are prohibitions against sexuality and violence (127, 66). Bataille defines the world of discontinuity, work, and prohibition as the profane world, the world of humanity "formé dans la négation de l'animalité" (71, 89–91).⁵⁷ Yet this discontinuity, this isolation, is illusory, a "mensonge" revealed as such in death (105).⁵⁸ In both death and transgression, humanity finds its "continuité fondamentale," its "continuité perdue," a formulation that clearly evokes Nietzsche's conception of Apollonian individuality as semblance (106).⁵⁹ However, as will become clear, Bataille's dichotomy of a false and fundamental state does not equate to a metaphysical distinction between appearance and reality; indeed, metaphysics is dismissed entirely as Bataille grounds both discontinuity and continuity within the material realm.

⁵¹ Bataille, *L'Érotisme*, 139; "which, in the sense of going beyond, displaces interest from personal being and all limits, is however expressed by an object. We are before this paradox: before an object that signifies the negation of the limits of all objects, before *an erotic object*."

⁵² *Ibid.*, 153; "the role of beauty in eroticism."

⁵³ Suzanne Guerlac, "Recognition" by a Woman!: a Reading of Bataille's *L'Érotisme*, *Yale French Studies* 78 (1990): 92–3.

⁵⁴ Bataille, *L'Érotisme*, 139; "offer themselves as objects of the aggressive desire of men."

⁵⁵ "Discontinuous beings [...] Each being is distinct from all the others [...] He is born alone. He dies alone. Between one being and another, there is a gulf, there is a discontinuity."

⁵⁶ "The solidity, the sadness, and the hostility of prison walls."

⁵⁷ "Formed in the negation of animality."

⁵⁸ "Lie."

⁵⁹ "Fundamental continuity"; "lost continuity."

The relationship between transgression and prohibition involves an antagonism and co-dependency mimicking that of Dionysus and Apollo. The need for transgression, a form of “exubérance sexuelle,” belongs to man’s animality (170).⁶⁰ Man’s animalistic sexual drive “diminue l’aptitude au travail, de même qu’un travail soutenu diminue la faim sexuelle”; animality and humanity share an “incompatibilité dont la rigueur ne saurait être niée” (173).⁶¹ At the same time, however, the nature of transgression is determined by the everyday realm of work and the prohibition; transgression “lève l’interdit sans le supprimer” (39).⁶² Just as Dionysus is defined through its distinction against Apollo, and therefore requires its existence, transgression depends on the existence of the prohibition, for its rupture is “le ressort de l’érotisme” (39).⁶³ Since the prohibition is absent from animal sexuality, eroticism, which requires the prohibition, must be distinguished from “le retour à la liberté première” (262, 115).⁶⁴ For Nietzsche, Dionysian bliss is produced through the act of “tearing apart” Apollonian consciousness, and so too, for Bataille, erotic pleasure is always the pleasure of violating the prohibition: “jamais, humainement, l’interdit n’apparaît sans la révélation du plaisir, ni jamais le plaisir sans le sentiment de l’interdit” (115).⁶⁵ Transgression thus depends upon the prohibition, it “maintient l’interdit, le maintient *pour en jouir*” (42).⁶⁶ Indeed, an anxious awareness of the prohibition is only produced when this prohibition is transgressed. Just as the Dionysian realm requires, and hence creates, the Apollonian, so too does transgression require and hence reinforce the existence of the prohibition.

Dionysus revels in the destruction of Apollonian semblance and at the same time longs for release and escape in semblance, and, in a similar vein, the disorder of transgression “longs for” the order of the prohibition. Transgression necessitates degradation, and so “l’érotisme est jeté à la voirie” (151).⁶⁷ However, to live in “désordre permanent” without prohibitions is to exist in a state of “immense dérision” characterized by “une baisse de niveau répugnante” (250, 150); base sexuality is “fade,” unlike the “dénivellement vertigineux” offered to those who transgress an acknowledged prohibition (251).⁶⁸ Furthermore, just as Nietzsche posits the antagonism between

⁶⁰ “Sexual exuberance.”

⁶¹ “Diminishes the ability to work, just as sustained work diminishes our sexual appetite”; “incompatibility whose rigour cannot be denied.”

⁶² “Lifts the prohibition without eliminating it.” The most common means of translating Bataille’s expression “l’interdit” is to use the word “taboo,” and this is evident in, amongst other works, the most widely used English translation of Bataille’s *L’Érotisme*, which is *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, published by City Lights Books. The term “taboo” strikes me as an unfavorable translation; the term “prohibition” is more faithful to Bataille’s concept. Importantly, Bataille used “taboo”—“le tabou”—in early works that prefigured *L’Érotisme*, but eventually replaced this by the term “l’interdit”: the interdiction or prohibition. Thus, it must be remarked that Bataille deliberately moves away from the term “taboo.”

⁶³ “The pulse of eroticism.”

⁶⁴ “The return to primitive freedom.”

⁶⁵ “Never, humanly, does the prohibition appear without a revelation of pleasure, and nor does the pleasure without the feeling of prohibition.”

⁶⁶ “Maintains the prohibition, maintains it *in order to enjoy it*.”

⁶⁷ “Eroticism is thrown into the trash.”

⁶⁸ “Permanent disorder”; “immense derision”; “a repugnant fall in standards”; “bland”; “vertiginous staggering.”

Apollo and Dionysus as always ending with the prevalence of the latter, so too does Bataille suggest that the effects of transgression linger even in the restored profane world: “la violence sexuelle ouvre une plaie. Rarement la plaie se referme d’elle-même [...] La violence de ce désordre, quand l’être qui l’éprouve a la connaissance de la mort, rouvre en lui l’abîme que la mort lui révéla” (112).⁶⁹ Bataille is, as Noys notes,⁷⁰ “obviously more interested in transgression than taboos” just as Nietzsche, while unable to dispense with Apollo, places a greater emphasis on the Dionysian aesthetic. Bataille’s prohibition and transgression, like Nietzsche’s Apollo and Dionysus, are antagonistic but not oppositional, “simultanément—ou successivement” composing eroticism just as the interplay between Apollo and Dionysus composes tragedy, leading to “la synthèse de l’animalité et de l’homme.”⁷¹

The sacred and the insane

For Bataille, as for Nietzsche, the Dionysian state is freely entered into: the trance it involves “ne peut se donner cours sans l’accord de la volonté” (112).⁷² Erotic transgression is a religious experience, evoking “le monde *divin* (le monde *sacré*),” but must be distinguished from Christianity, which “s’opposant à l’érotisme” just as it opposes art for Nietzsche (89, 36).⁷³ By religious experience, Bataille refers to “les cultes de Kali ou de Dionysos, le tantrisme et tant d’autres formes érotiques de la religion” (168).⁷⁴ The ancient “fêtes de Dionysos” featured the same fusion of religious and erotic ecstasy that is triggered in sexual transgression (119).⁷⁵ Although Bataille does not explicitly mention eroticism in *Théorie de la religion*, written in 1948 and published in 1973, in explaining the value of religion to humanity—as he does when he states that “l’essence” of religion “est la recherche de l’intimité perdue,” and when he describes the “sensibilité religieuse” as the notion that “*la vie humaine est une expérience à mener le plus loin possible, la somme universelle*”—Bataille indicates that the religious experience is, in principle, extremely close to the erotic experience elaborated in *L’Érotisme*.⁷⁶ Religion was an integral referent for Bataille’s thinking on eroticism, and it is no surprise that he envisages a space for the divine in the material world.

However, Bataille states in *L’Érotisme* that to completely conflate mysticism and eroticism is “à rabaisser l’expérience des mystiques” and to erroneously “spiritualiser le

⁶⁹ “Sexual violence opens a wound. The wound rarely heals on its own [...] The violence of this disorder, when the being who experiences it has knowledge of death, reopens in him the abyss that death has already revealed to him.”

⁷⁰ Benjamin Noys, *Georges Bataille: a Critical Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 88.

⁷¹ Bataille, *L’Érotisme*, 71, 89; “simultaneously—or successively”; “the synthesis of animality and humanity.”

⁷² “Cannot happen without the consent of our will.”

⁷³ “The *divine* world (the *sacred* world); “opposes eroticism.”

⁷⁴ “The cults of Kali or of Dionysus, Tantrism, and so many other erotic forms of religion.”

⁷⁵ “Dionysian festivals.”

⁷⁶ Georges Bataille, “Théorie de la religion,” in *Œuvres complètes VII* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 315, 249; “the essence”; “is the search for lost intimacy”; “religious sensibility”; “*human life is an experience to take as far as possible, the universal sum.*”

domaine de la sexualité,” contending that neither transgression nor eroticism are properly “spirituel,” that is, metaphysical.⁷⁷ In *Les larmes d’Éros*, Bataille explains eroticism’s affinity with religion by stipulating that the basis of religion lies in the interdiction of particular acts. The interdiction, like the prohibition, imbues these acts with sacred value.⁷⁸ Bataille defines Dionysus as “le dieu de la transgression religieuse [...] le dieu dont l’essence divine est la folie” and reiterates that “pour commencer, la folie elle-même est d’essence divine. Divine, c’est-à-dire, ici, refusant la règle de la raison.”⁷⁹ Religious sacrifice, Bataille argues, results in transcendence for its participants: not transcendence of the physical world but transcendence of “la vie ordinaire,” of custom, routine, and rationality.⁸⁰ Bataille’s account of religious experience omits any reference to a spiritual or metaphysical realm by framing divinity as the experience of madness that allows transcendence of order and reason but not of the material world. Bataille thus accounts for mysticism in “non-reductive materialistic terms,” drawing upon Nietzsche’s “spiritualization [...] of the senses.”⁸¹

Delirious materialism

Bataille also uses Nietzschean strategies in reconciling his sacred eroticism with the material, affective body. For Bataille, the primary quality shared by mysticism and transgression is the affective experience they invoke, “le réflexe même.”⁸² This is the feeling of losing control, in which anguish is followed by ecstatic reeling and “ravisements,” a form of organic intoxication much like that which occurs in Nietzsche’s physiological aesthetic (253).⁸³ One central feature of this experience is the dissolution of subject-object distinctions and the distortion of time and space: “Il n’y a plus, sur aucun point, de différence: impossible de situer une distance, le sujet perdu dans la présence indistincte et illimitée de l’univers et de lui-même cesse d’appartenir au déroulement sensible du temps. Il est absorbé dans l’instant qui s’éternise. Apparemment de façon définitive, sans que dure l’attachement à l’avenir ou au passé, il est dans l’instant, et l’instant, à lui seul, est l’éternité” (255).⁸⁴

⁷⁷ Bataille, *L’Érotisme*, 252; “to diminish the experience of the mystics”; “spiritualise the domain of sexuality”; “spiritual.”

⁷⁸ Bataille, *Les larmes*, 609.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 610; “the god of religious transgression [...] the god whose divine essence is madness”; “to begin with, madness is itself of divine essence. Divine, that is to say, here, refusing the law of reason.”

⁸⁰ Bataille, *L’Érotisme*, 258; “ordinary life.”

⁸¹ Jim Urpeth, “Religious Materialism: Bataille, Deleuze/Guattari and the Sacredness of Late Capital,” in *Difference in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip Goodchild (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 176; Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 262.

⁸² Bataille, *L’Érotisme*, 254; “the same reflex.”

⁸³ “Raptures.”

⁸⁴ “There is no longer difference in any extent: it is impossible to situate a distance, the subject, lost in the indistinct and unlimited presence of the universe and of himself, ceases to belong to the perceptible unfolding of time. He is absorbed in the eternal instant. Seemingly final, no longer with an attachment to the future or the past, he is in the instant, and the instant, in itself alone, is eternity.”

Like Nietzsche, Bataille emphasizes a sense of animal corporeality: although the role of the prohibition makes eroticism “une activité humaine,” “l’animalité n’en est pas moins le fondement [...] C’est abusivement que la transgression de l’interdit a pris le sens de retour à la nature, dont l’animal est l’expression. Toutefois l’activité à laquelle l’interdit s’oppose est semblable à celle des animaux” (102).⁸⁵ In transgression, all semantic certainty dissolves as “une rage, brusquement, s’empare d’un être” (113).⁸⁶ Bataille describes how, in ancient orgies, the transgressing subject became convulsive, thrown into a “désordre des cris, désordre des gestes violents et des danses, désordre des étreintes, désordre enfin des sentiments, qu’animait une convulsion sans mesure [...] les éléments stables de l’activité humaine se dérobaient, où il n’était plus rien qui ne perdît pieds” (121).⁸⁷ The subject experiences the world through delirium, through Nietzschean intoxication, and thus any grasp on absolute knowledge dissolves, a principle that lies at the heart of Bataille’s concept of eroticism: “ce qui dès l’abord est sensible dans l’érotisme est l’ébranlement, par un désordre pléthorique, d’un ordre expressif d’une réalité parcimonieuse, d’une réalité fermée” (112).⁸⁸ Bataille’s materialistic theory of eroticism therefore discounts a transcendental truth; eroticism is framed, like religion, as a matter of the “immanent sublimity registered intensively in impersonal affect” that also refuses to locate truth in the material realm.⁸⁹ Meaning is confined to one’s delirious interpretation of the world, so that truth is always fleeting and contingent. Bataille’s violent eroticism thus echoes the physiological aesthetic of Nietzsche’s *The Will to Power* both in the experience it calls forth and in demonstrating a form of “matérialisme n’impliquant pas d’ontologie, n’impliquant pas que la matière est la chose en soi,” as Bataille had outlined in his 1930 essay “Le bas matérialisme et la gnose.”⁹⁰

Bataille’s “base materialism” aims to disrupt the hierarchies of value evident within traditional materialisms, such as distinctions between “l’obscurité terrifiante des tombes ou des caves et la splendeur lumineuse du ciel, l’impureté de la terre où les corps pourrissent et la pureté des espaces aériens; dans l’ordre individuel les parties basses et les parties nobles.”⁹¹ Such dichotomies, Bataille explains, tend to infiltrate

⁸⁵ “A human activity”; “animality is nonetheless the basis [...] It is misguided to take transgression and prohibition as a return to nature, as expressed by animals. Nevertheless, the activity which the prohibition opposes is similar to that of animals.”

⁸⁶ “A fury suddenly takes hold of a being.”

⁸⁷ “Chaos of cries, a chaos of violent gestures and dances, a chaos of grasping, a chaos, finally, of emotions, which animated a convulsion without measure [...] the stable elements of human activity gave out, where there was no longer anything that hadn’t lost its foothold.”

⁸⁸ “That which is most immediately noticeable in eroticism is the shaking, by a plethoric disorder, of an order expressive of a parsimonious reality, of a closed reality.”

⁸⁹ Urpeth, “Religious Materialism,” 172.

⁹⁰ Georges Bataille, “Le bas matérialisme et la gnose,” in *Œuvres complètes I, Premiers Écrits 1922–1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 225; “materialism not implying an ontology, not implying that matter is a thing in itself.”

⁹¹ Georges Bataille, “La ‘vieille taupe’ et le préfixe *sur* dans les mots *surhomme* et *surréaliste*,” in *Œuvres complètes II, Écrits posthumes 1922–1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 97–8; “The terrifying obscurity of tombs and caverns and the luminous splendor of heaven, the impurity of the earth where bodies decay and the purity of ethereal spaces; in the individual order the base parts and the noble parts.”

materialism even as materialism attempts to avoid transcendent or spiritual frameworks.⁹² Bataille's base materialism pays no reverence to the "élevé," but rather respects that which is "*bas*," which can never "servir en aucun cas à singer une autorité quelconque."⁹³ Base materialism enabled Bataille to demolish the hierarchy between vulgar and noble, high and low, by demonstrating that "whatever is elevated or ideal is actually dependent on base matter, and that this dependence means that the purity of the ideal is contaminated."⁹⁴ The metaphor that Bataille uses to demonstrate this idea is that of the big toe. The big toe, in Bataille's opinion, is regarded as repulsive, "analogue, psychologiquement, à la chute brutale d'un homme, ce qui revient à dire à la mort. L'aspect hideusement cadavérique."⁹⁵ Yet it is this base bodily appendage that allows man to stand erect, with his head "élevée vers le ciel et les choses du ciel"; without the base, the heavenly would be unattainable.⁹⁶ Bataille's base materialism can be seen to comfortably contextualize his appropriation of Nietzsche's theory of tragedy. Transgression—that which is base in man—might be defined against the prohibition—that which is noble—but the two forms, in being entirely dependent upon each other, illustrate Bataille's conviction that no hierarchy of value can exist within a materialist schema.

Dissolution and continuity

Bataille's use of Nietzsche's physiological aesthetic encompasses the most significant principle of transgression, an experience that is at once "violemment religieuse" and "un mouvement embrasé [...] un mouvement perdu" that constituted "la pratique dionysiaque."⁹⁷ When one transgresses the prohibition, "le sentiment de soi" and knowledge of one's limits are shattered; transgression destroys discontinuous subjectivity.⁹⁸ Bataille roots this experience within the body by identifying it with sexual climax: "l'être en vérité se divise, son unité se rompt, dès le premier instant de la crise sexuelle," in which one experiences a "mouvement de perte rapide, glissant vite à la tragédie."⁹⁹ Here, Bataille evokes the identification of aesthetic experience and orgasm offered by Nietzsche, with its physiological effects of explosion, release, secretion, and sexual ecstasy.¹⁰⁰ Nietzsche's notion that sexuality is necessarily vicious

⁹² Ibid., 98.

⁹³ Bataille, "Le bas matérialisme," 225; "elevated"; "low"; "serve in any case to ape any kind of authority."

⁹⁴ Benjamin Noys, "Georges Bataille's Base Materialism," *Journal for Cultural Research* 2, no. 4 (1998): 500.

⁹⁵ Georges Bataille, "Le gros orteil," in *Œuvres complètes I, Premiers Écrits 1922–1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 203; "psychologically analogous to the brutal fall of a man, that which means death. The hideously cadaverous appearance."

⁹⁶ Ibid., 200; "elevated towards the heavens and heavenly things."

⁹⁷ Bataille, *Les larmes*, 606; "violently religious"; "a blazing movement [...] a lost movement"; "Dionysian practice."

⁹⁸ Bataille, *L'Érotisme*, 109–10; "the feeling of self."

⁹⁹ Ibid., 112, 246; "in truth, the being splits up, its unity shattered, from the first moment of sexual crisis"; "movement of rapid loss, sliding quickly into tragedy."

¹⁰⁰ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 255.

sees a correspondence in the work of Bataille, who argues that “brusquement elle s’ouvre à la violence de jeu sexuel déchaîné dans les organes de la reproduction” as well as to the brutal experience of self-dissolution.¹⁰¹ In the sexual act, “l’amant ne désagrège pas moins la femme aimée que le sacrificateur sanglant l’homme ou l’animal immolé. La femme dans les mains de celui qui l’assaille est dépossédée de son être,” these disparate gendered roles cohering closely with those posited in Nietzsche’s gendered aesthetic: “dans le mouvement de dissolution des êtres, le partenaire masculin a en principe un rôle actif, la partie féminine est passive” (96, 19); the female is the “victime,” the male is the “sacrificateur” (20).¹⁰² In Nietzschean terms, the female is the passive recipient of male ugliness. However, despite these power relations, the male achieves “au même point de dissolution” as the female victim (19). By stating that the “glissement aveugle vers la perte [...] est le moment décisif de la religiosité,” Bataille borrows from Nietzsche’s affective-religious vocabulary, and also draws upon Nietzsche’s rubric of physical illness in describing the dissolution of individuality: one witnesses “une maladie, l’analogie de la rage des chiens [...] c’est même trop peu parler de maladie. Pour le moment, la personnalité est morte” (121, 113).¹⁰³

The dissolution of discontinuous subjectivity effected through transgression enables the construction of continuous subjectivity. For Bataille, this is not a metaphysical process but is constrained to the material realm. He uses biological case studies to demonstrate the transition from discontinuity to continuity, and the way in which this transition is “le plus violent” (18).¹⁰⁴ In cellular reproduction, his formulation follows, cell *a* splits up to become *a'* and *a''*: “ce qui n’était pas encore *a'* était continu avec *a*” [...] C’est la pléthore qui commence un glissement où l’être se divise, mais il se divise au moment même, au moment du glissement, au moment critique où ces êtres, qui tout à l’heure s’opposent l’un à l’autre, ne s’opposent pas encore [...] Dans la pléthore, l’être passe du calme du repos, à l’état d’agitation violente: cette turbulence, cette agitation, atteignent l’être entier, elles l’atteignent dans sa continuité [...] Le calme enfin revient dans la séparation achevée, où se trouvent deux êtres distincts” (104–5).¹⁰⁵ The movement from discontinuity to continuity and back again is also demonstrated in “la pléthore des organes mâles et femelles aboutissant à la crise de la reproduction sexuée,”

¹⁰¹ Bataille, *L’Érotisme*, 96; “she brusquely opens herself to the violence of the sexual game unleashed in the reproductive organs.”

¹⁰² “The lover disintegrates his beloved no less than the bloody priest his immolated human or animal. In the hands of he who assails her, the woman is dispossessed of her being”; “in the movement of the dissolution of beings, the masculine partner has in principle an active role, the female party is passive”; “victim”; “sacrificer.”

¹⁰³ “The same degree of dissolution”; “blind sliding towards obliteration [...] is the decisive moment in religiosity”; “a sickness, similar to dogs’ rabies [...] it’s even an understatement to speak of sickness. For the moment, the personality is *dead*.”

¹⁰⁴ “The most violent.”

¹⁰⁵ “That which was not yet *a'* was continuous with *a*” [...] It is the plethora that begins a movement in which the being divides, but it divides at the very moment, the moment of the movement, the critical moment in which these beings, who will very shortly oppose one another, do not yet do so [...] In the plethora, the being passes from the calm of repose to the state of violent agitation: this turbulence, this agitation, gets hold of the entire being, gets hold of it in its continuity [...] Calm finally returns in the completed separation, where there is two distinct beings.”

whereby the fusion of reproductive cells will eventually produce a discontinuous being (105).¹⁰⁶ Animals, too, achieve “le sentiment de continuité” during sexual frenzy (106).¹⁰⁷ Although human eroticism is always a movement toward death because death enables the ultimate state of continuity, actual death would not enhance the erotic experience (15, 20); the participants of eroticism are merely dead as individuals, experiencing “continuité, opposée à la discontinuité de l'être,” in which consciousness is bound to “une continuité première, qui nous relie généralement à l'être” (18, 17).¹⁰⁸ Subjectivity never truly dissolves for Bataille because self-loss also means self-constitution.¹⁰⁹ Bataille suggests that “ce vague sentiment de continuité” constitutes an alternate form of subjectivity by framing it as “une identité profonde.”¹¹⁰ As in Nietzsche's Dionysian aesthetic state, man is “happily alive, not as individuals, but as the *one* living being,” albeit a being confined to the material world in which “continuity” represents “a material field of self-differentiation.”¹¹¹ The erotic state signifies “the world of the presence of I, and the world of the absence of I [...] the opposition, thus is not between this world and then the other world, but the world of identity and its alteration.”¹¹² Bataille's eroticism demonstrates how his dualistic materialism refuses a division between physical and metaphysical, relocating duality within the material world.¹¹³ As such, the discontinuous world of the prohibition can only be deemed illusory insofar as it obscures another mode of being. These two modes of being ensure that the subject of Bataille's Nietzschean aesthetic is not unified and coherent but always contingent and fractured, the subject's constant movement between continuity and discontinuity demonstrating that “thinking matter as difference means thinking matter as unstable.”¹¹⁴ These different states are inextricably connected: the death of the individual subject allows the creation of the continuous subject, and this is one of the reasons why Bataille emphasizes the inextricability of life and death in eroticism. Eroticism, like sacrifice, has the capacity “d'accorder la vie et la mort, de donner à la mort le rejaillissement de la vie, à la vie la lourdeur, le vertige et l'ouverture de la mort. C'est la vie mêlée à la mort, mais en lui, dans le même moment, la mort est signe de vie, ouverture à l'illimité.”¹¹⁵ Bataille's account of eroticism mimics Nietzsche's view of existence as a process of becoming rather than being, a process of unremitting creation and destruction in which experience and truth are always unstable, provisional

¹⁰⁶ “The plethora of the male and female organs ending with the crisis of sexual reproduction.”

¹⁰⁷ “The feeling of continuity.”

¹⁰⁸ “Continuity, in contrast with the discontinuity of being”; “a primal continuity, which connects us generally with all being.”

¹⁰⁹ Dean, *Self and its Pleasures*, 245.

¹¹⁰ Bataille, *L'Érotisme*, 107; “this vague feeling of continuity”; “a deep-seated identity.”

¹¹¹ Nietzsche, *Tragedy*, 81; Urpeth, “Religious Materialism,” 175.

¹¹² Denis Hollier, “The Dualistic Materialism of Georges Bataille,” in *Bataille: a Critical Reader*, eds. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 66.

¹¹³ Hollier, “Dualistic Materialism,” 64–5.

¹¹⁴ Noys, “Base Materialism,” 503.

¹¹⁵ Bataille, *L'Érotisme*, 97; “to bring life and death into harmony, to give to death the surge of life, and to life heaviness, vertigo, and the opening of death. It is life mixed with death, but in itself, in the same instant, death is a sign of life, an opening to the infinite.”

constructs. Indeed, Nietzsche's concept underlies Bataille's preference for the terms "l'animalité" and "l'homme" over "nature" and "culture." The former terms, free of the rigidity of the latter terms, capture the human subject's capacity for change and synthesis as identity is demolished and rebuilt in the erotic experience, "du devenir de l'être en général."¹¹⁶

Insofar as violent sexuality is framed as an experience that intimately binds destruction and creation, life and death in *Histoire d'O* and *L'image*, as I demonstrate in the following chapter, these texts are also colored with Nietzsche's theory of becoming, illuminating Nietzsche's claim that this notion may be seen as a development of the metaphysics of *The Birth of Tragedy*. In the next chapter, I elaborate upon what I have demonstrated here: that the many links that exist between Nietzsche's first book and his posthumously published notebooks are drawn together by avant-garde sadomasochism-themed literature of the 1950s in its construction of violent sexuality as an ecstatic aesthetic experience that dissolves and reconstructs subjectivity while undermining the very notion of subjective essence, the possibility of simply being. While Bataille presents this construction within a materialistic framework, *Histoire d'O* and *L'image*, as I show, are largely grounded in the metaphysical discourse of *The Birth of Tragedy*.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 222–3; "of becoming, of being in general."

Tragic self-shattering III: mortifying metaphysics in Réage's *Histoire d'O* and Berg's *L'image*

It is not surprising that Réage's *Histoire d'O* (1954), which narrates a young woman's sadomasochistic journey of sexual enslavement to a group of elite men, has been critiqued for its portrait of gender relations. What is surprising, however, is that this concern has almost completely dominated scholarly engagement with a novel that enjoyed such a celebrated, thoughtful, and varied initial reception. With a meager handful of exceptions, contemporary scholarship has, from the perspective of varying feminisms, focused primarily on critiquing what it sees as the novel's patriarchal values. I aim to bring a fresh perspective to *Histoire d'O* by demonstrating how it articulates the principles of Nietzsche's aesthetic philosophy, particularly the concepts of Apollo and Dionysus detailed in *The Birth of Tragedy* and revisited in *The Will to Power*. *Histoire d'O* employs Nietzschean aesthetics to construct violent sexuality as a sublime aesthetic experience that—in exhibiting the *ars erotica*'s celebrated “singular bliss, obliviousness to time and limits”—dissolves individual subjectivity and refashions collective subjectivity, enacting Nietzsche's critique of truth and essential identity.¹ The aesthetic themes of *Histoire d'O* are also employed in *L'image*, whose embryonic recognition in Anglophone literary criticism obscures its significance to the literary history of sadomasochism.

Apollonian lust

The aesthetic experience of violent sexuality commences with the desire incited by the female participant, who is framed, in *Histoire d'O*, as an aesthetic object in accordance with Nietzsche's deeply sexualized account of beauty. O's beauty is continually emphasized throughout the novel, beginning with the meticulous makeup regime she undertakes at Roissy that requires her to rouge her nipples, labia, and lips.² Her body is

¹ Foucault, *Will to Knowledge*, 58.

² Pauline Réage, *Histoire d'O* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1975), 28.

dressed and assessed according to its aesthetic appeal, her black stockings “soulignant la finesse de ses jambes et la blancheur de ses cuisses” (99).³ Aesthetic considerations likewise govern the mode of torture O undergoes, which is judged on the basis of “les traces plus ou moins vives ou durables, que les fouets laisseraient sur sa peau” (34).⁴ O’s whip marks are appraised in terms of their visual impact—“les balafres s’étaient gonflées, et formaient des bourrelets étroits beaucoup plus foncés que le rouge des murs”—and greatly enhance the appeal O holds for Sir Stephen, who finds her “infiniment plus émouvante lorsque son corps portait des marques” (47, 127).⁵ O’s meticulous embellishment testifies to the way in which her body marries aesthetic and erotic imperatives: “by becoming an art object she also becomes a sex object.”⁶ Like O, Anne, in *L’image*, is her lover’s “finest artistic production.”⁷ She shares O’s makeup regime, beautified by the rouge applied to mouth and nipples, and the appeal of this “objet de convoitise” is conceived in similar aesthetic terms: “au-dessus des bas, dont le revers s’ornait d’une discrète broderie, la peau soyeuse, brillante, blanche avec des reflets blonds, était barrée verticalement par d’étroites jarretelles en satin noir” (52, 50–1).⁸ Jean, the novel’s narrator, occupies a milieu comprised of “écrivains ou amateurs d’art,” and his appraisal of Anne reveals the sensibility of an astute art critic (18).⁹ When Claire, Anne’s mistress, presents her submissive lover to Jean with a rose delicately placed in her pubic hair, she declares the scene “joli, vous ne trouvez pas?” (56).¹⁰ Jean concurs, with the reservation that the image is “un peu trop chargée de symboles, peut-être, dans le meilleur goût de la tradition surréaliste et romantique” (57).¹¹ Claire later anticipates that the scarring left upon Anne by a particularly intense whipping “sera très joli,” evidencing the way she “surveillait d’un œil critique les progrès de son élève dans l’art de se montrer une parfaite esclave” (179, 126).¹² (*L’image*, too, reintroduces the flower trope that permeates the nineteenth-century construction of perverse decadent sexuality examined in Chapter 3. The novel features a flower that imitates the sexualized human body: Anne is enamored of a rose of “une couleur délicate de chair” that she caresses suggestively: “très doucement elle a passé le bout des doigts sur l’extrême bord des pétales à demi fermés, effleurant à peine la chair rose et tendre. Elle a tourné plusieurs fois autour du creux central, avec lenteur [...] elle y a introduit d’un coup le médius, qui a disparu presque entièrement dans le creux. Elle a ensuite retiré

³ “Emphasizing the delicateness of her legs and the whiteness of her thighs.”

⁴ “The traces more or less intense or long-lasting, that the whips would leave on her skin.”

⁵ “The scars were swollen, and formed narrow ridges much darker than the red of the walls”; “infinitely more moving when her body bore marks.”

⁶ Maurice Charney, “Erotic Sainthood and the Search for Self-Annihilation,” in *Sexual Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1981), 58.

⁷ Cryle, *Geometry*, 234.

⁸ Jean de Berg, *L’image* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1956) 157; “coveted object”; “above her stockings, their tops adorned with discreet embroidery, the silky skin, bright, white, with shimmers of blonde, was vertically crossed by narrow black satin suspenders.”

⁹ “Writers or art enthusiasts.”

¹⁰ “Pretty, don’t you think?”

¹¹ “A little too loaded with symbols, perhaps, in the best taste of the surrealist and romantic traditions.”

¹² “Will be very pretty”; “monitored with a critical eye her pupil’s progress in the art of being a perfect slave.”

son doigt, très lentement . . . pour le replonger aussitôt à fond” [40, 42–3].¹³ That the sexuality metaphorized in the flower has a distinctly cruel flavor is suggested as Claire uses its thorns to pierce the sensitive flesh near Anne’s pubic region (54.).

The aesthetic appeal that Anne and O present for their lovers is, as in Nietzsche’s conception of beauty, linked to their lovers’ “longing for the ecstasy of sexual desire.”¹⁴ This ecstasy is Dionysian in character and is defined by its contrast with Apollonian consciousness. Apollonian consciousness is signified throughout *Histoire d’O* through various metaphors that evoke those employed by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*. In the following passage, the Apollonian metaphor of the surface of the calm sea hints at the illusory nature of the daylight world O observes while visiting Sir Stephen’s villa near Cannes, in the south-east of France: “le ciel bleu et fixe, la mer qui bougeait à peine, les pins immobiles sous le haut soleil, tout lui parut minéral et hostile. ‘Pas de vrais arbres,’ disait-elle tristement [. . .] ‘La mer ne sent pas la mer,’ disait-elle encore. Elle lui reprochait de ne rejeter que de méchantes algues rares et jaunâtres qui ressemblaient à du crottin, d’être trop bleue, de lécher le rivage toujours à la même place.”¹⁵

The authenticity of the sea is also discredited by its scent, which lacks “la tenace odeur marine qui lui restait aux doigts” during O’s Dionysian tryst with a female lover (112).¹⁶ Likewise, the trees and seaweed appear to be something they are not. The calm sea trope is also coupled with the metaphor of the mirror, which produces images of beauty that have only the appearance of reality: towards the pinnacle of O’s sadomasochistic quest, she views herself “dans un miroir ancien, un peu verdie et tremblée comme dans un étang” (194).¹⁷ The most significant Apollonian figure in *Histoire d’O* is O’s foil and lover, Jacqueline. Jacqueline, a model and the subject of O’s photographs, is self-focused and self-contained, an isolated individual and happily so. While O yields entirely to her male lovers, Jacqueline submits only briefly to O before becoming “à la fois provocante et fuyante, d’une incroyable habileté à l’esquive, s’arrangeant sans jamais une faute pour ne donner prise ni à un geste, ni à un mot, ni même à un regard qui permit de faire coïncider cette triomphante avec cette vaincue” (136).¹⁸ O’s belief that she possesses Jacqueline is an error of judgment flagged by the narrator with the statement “du moins elle le croyait” (167).¹⁹ Jacqueline placidly takes

¹³ “A delicate flesh color”; “very gently, she passed her fingertips over the very edge of the semi-closed petals, barley touching the pink and tender flesh. She slowly rotated several times around the central hollow [. . .] she suddenly inserted her middle finger, which disappeared almost entirely into the hollow. She then very slowly withdrew her finger . . . only to immediately plunge it in again as far as it would go.”

¹⁴ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 248.

¹⁵ Réage, *Histoire d’O*, 180; “the still blue sky, the sea that barely moved, the motionless pines beneath the high sun, everything seemed to her to be mineral and hostile. ‘No real trees,’ she said sadly [. . .] ‘The sea doesn’t smell like the sea,’ she added. She reproached [the sea] for depositing only the occasional dreadful dull yellowish seaweed that resembled dung, for being too blue, for always lapping against the shore in the same place.”

¹⁶ “The stubborn marine odor that lingered on her fingers.”

¹⁷ “In an old mirror, slightly greenish and tremulous as in a pond.”

¹⁸ “At the same time provocative and elusive, incredibly skillful at evasion, faultlessly managing to resist any gesture, word, or look that would allow the meeting of the conqueror and the conquest.”

¹⁹ “At least she thought so.”

pleasure from O because “elle ne risquait rien,” in contrast to O, whose sexual encounters with men risk even her own identity, as it will become clear (143).²⁰ Jacqueline reinforces her impenetrable sense of self through her personal belongings, being “passionnément attachée à ce qui lui appartenait [...] mais d’une indifférence absolue à ce qui ne lui appartenait pas” (143).²¹ An utter disinterest in anything not relating to herself highlights her isolated individuality, and indeed, O comes to realize that Jacqueline “ne s’intéressait à O que pour la passion qu’O lui témoignait” (177, 154).²² While O’s clothes, as we shall see, signify the porous boundaries of her identity, Jacqueline’s sartorial repertoire of tight-fitting black cropped pants and tight black linen sweaters symbolizes her impermeable limits of being, indicating that she is “si insolente, si fermée” (186).²³ Descriptions of Jacqueline are permeated with Nietzsche’s Apollonian tropes: she is “si dorée, si dure, et si claire dans le plein soleil” and as composed as a placid sea, only occasionally hinting at “le trouble proche sous l’eau” (186, 136).²⁴ She is, above all, associated with the image of beauty: O is mesmerized by Jacqueline’s beauty, which she absorbs repeatedly through the reflections of mirrors and photographs. Jacqueline represents the “lovely semblance” of individuality, a function of Apollonian consciousness that O only occasionally registers and disdains. This recognition occurs at O’s workplace, where she is employed as an “image-making” photographer; here she becomes aware of her separation from her lover René, conscious of her isolation (116). She also observes Apollonian consciousness in her first sexual encounter with Sir Stephen, noting and despising his self-containment, wishing “qu’il fût impatient de toucher ses lèvres et de pénétrer son corps, qu’il la saccageât au besoin, mais qu’il ne pût devant elle garder son calme et maîtriser son plaisir” (97).²⁵

Apollonian metaphors also abound in *L’image*, primarily, as the title suggests, through “image-making” and visual arousal. An emphasis on looking and eyes permeates the novel, and the events that take place are framed and discussed by the narrator as images. *L’image* mimics the association made in *Histoire d’O* of nature with the Apollonian mirror-water metaphor and its suggestion of illusion: when Anne is forced to urinate in a park, Jean observes the stream of liquid upon the dead leaves, noting the way in which a droplet falls “pour venir s’écraser sur une feuille presque intacte, à peu près plane et horizontale, où l’eau en s’étalant a formé comme un petit miroir, qui a mis plusieurs secondes à disparaître.”²⁶ *L’image* also replicates what in *Histoire d’O* is an eroticized relationship between photographer and model, although in this instance it is the “image-maker,” rather than the visual subject, who predominantly occupies Apollonian consciousness. Claire the photographer resembles Jacqueline the

²⁰ “She risked nothing.”

²¹ “Passionately attached to that which belonged to her [...] but absolutely indifferent to that which did not belong to her.”

²² “Was only interested in O for the passion that O demonstrated to her.”

²³ “So insolent, so closed.”

²⁴ “So golden, so hard, so luminous in the full sun”; “the trouble close beneath the water.”

²⁵ “That he was longing to touch her lips and penetrate her body, that he devastate her if need be, but not to be able to maintain his composure and control his pleasure before her.”

²⁶ Berg, *L’image*, 74; “to crash against an almost intact leaf, just about flat and horizontal, where the water, spreading out, formed a kind of small mirror, which took several seconds to disappear.”

model in displaying a calm, rigid, and impenetrable beauty: “cette beauté trop parfaite, trop régulière, trop inaltérable” (36); “une beauté régulière et figée.” (62).²⁷ Like that of Jacqueline, Claire’s self-containment is reflected in her favored outfit of tight black pants and sweater, “closed” clothes (145). However, like Jacqueline’s, Claire’s calm Apollonian self-possession occasionally cracks to reveal the Dionysian turmoil beneath. When Claire displays to Jean a series of sadomasochistic photographs she has taken featuring the submission of Anne, Jean recognizes the final image of a masturbating woman to be of Claire rather than of her young devotee. When he inquires after the identity of the model, Claire’s calm exterior briefly dissolves, to Jean’s pleasure: “son visage n’était plus le même: plus coloré, moins froid, visiblement troublé. L’ensemble de sa personne m’a semblé soudain infiniment plus désirable que d’ordinaire” (100).²⁸ In her moment of abandon, her hands glide toward her thighs, “mais Claire s’est reprise aussitôt [...] elle [...] m’est apparue à nouveau dans son attitude de tous les jours: stricte, rigide, d’une beauté sans faille” (101).²⁹ This shift in consciousness occurs again when Jean and Claire discuss the importance of full attire to the dominant role. As Claire speaks, Jean notes that “il y avait comme un soupçon de regret dans sa phrase. En même temps son regard est devenu plus vague, moins bien défendu” (146).³⁰ Yet her Apollonian façade falters only briefly; before long, “ses traits, peu à peu, se sont durcis” and it is only in Claire’s absence that Jean can imagine her being “moins inaccessible” (146–7, 145).³¹ Claire’s admiring lover, Anne, like O, also experiences occasional moments of Apollonian consciousness: when Anne and Jean meet by chance in a Montmartre bookstore, she is defensive and unyielding (78). Being willing to yield, being “open,” as we shall see, is a central characteristic of violent sexuality in *L’image* and particularly in *Histoire d’O*, in accordance with the goals of the Dionysian aesthetic experience.

Dionysian liaisons

In *Histoire d’O*, violent sexual practices occasionally take place with musical accompaniment: at Anne-Marie’s château, Sannois, where O is whipped, pierced, and branded in “la salle de musique”; a record player drowns her screams, and in the novel’s final sequence, a record player provides the background music for O’s owl-masked slide from humanity.³² Music forms a kind of Dionysian dithyramb, producing in aural form the pleasure to be found in aesthetic ugliness, which is not simply the pleasure O takes

²⁷ “This too perfect, too ordered, too inalterable beauty”; “an ordered and frozen beauty.”

²⁸ “Her face was no longer the same: more colored, less cold, visibly troubled. Her entire being suddenly seemed to me infinitively more desirable than usual.”

²⁹ “But Claire immediately recovered herself [...] she [...] appeared once again to bear her everyday demeanor: strict, rigid, flawlessly beautiful.”

³⁰ “There was a hint of regret in her speech. At the same time, her expression became vaguer, less guarded.”

³¹ “Her features, little by little, hardened”; “less inaccessible.”

³² Réage, *Histoire d’O*, 159, 160, 199; “the music hall.”

in pain but the pleasure others take in inflicting it. Observing one of her Roissy lovers, O recognizes that to “faire appel à sa pitié était le meilleur moyen pour qu’il redoublât de cruauté tant il prenait plaisir à lui arracher ou à lui faire arracher ces indubitables témoignages de son pouvoir” (35).³³ René announces that O’s submission affords him “incomparable plaisir,” and O experiences the “lust of domination” for herself, when, whipping Yvonne at Sannois, “elle avait été saisie par un terrible plaisir, si aigu qu’elle se sentait rire de joie malgré elle” (53, 166).³⁴ For the main part, however, the novel is largely focused upon O’s “talent for suffering,” her ability to derive “primal pleasure” from pain, which is always a manifestation of another’s power.³⁵ It is the feeling of submitting absolutely to Sir Stephen’s power, more than the physical stimulation he offers in penetrating her with his hand, that makes O moan with pleasure (189–90). Sexual violence, for O, is like musical dissonance, with “aesthetic delight” always to be found in physical expressions of ugliness: “la terreur lui était si douce”; “elle était [...] d’autant plus heureuse qu’il avait été plus cruel et plus long” (44, 161).³⁶

The asymmetric power relations that compose violent sexuality in *Histoire d’O* are gendered, as the novel’s feminist critics have repeatedly emphasized, dominance being a masculine trait, submission a female one: with her male lovers, O is feminine and therefore passive, and with her female lovers, O demonstrates “conduite masculine,” and is accordingly active, taking up the role of the penetrator, the caresser, the pursuer, “un oiseau de proie naturellement dressé” (111, 194).³⁷ These gendered power positions are not simply demonstrative or symptomatic of patriarchy, a point that has been labored to exhaustion, but are also rooted in Nietzsche’s patriarchal and often misogynistic aesthetic philosophy, cohering with his rigid notion of the masculine active artist, the “giver,” and his right to inflict ugliness upon the passive feminine spectator, the “receiver.” I do not make this point to excuse or justify the gendered sexual roles of *Histoire d’O* but to highlight their philosophical underpinning. Feminist critics have also suggested that the sadomasochistic power relations in *Histoire d’O* illustrate those governing all intimate heterosexual relations in wider society, proposing, for example, that O’s labia ring is analogous to the symbolism of the wedding ring.³⁸ While I am not positing any connections between *Histoire d’O* and heterosexual relations more broadly, I suggest that within the text, the power dynamics and use of pain that define O’s explicitly violent experiences color all forms of sexuality, that, indeed, in this novel, there is no delineation between “violence” and “sexuality.” When Pierre fondles O, “il lui prenait les seins” (67), and when the four anonymous Roissy

³³ “Appealing to his pity was the best means of having him redouble his cruelty, so much was the pleasure he took in extracting from her, or having others extract from her, this unmistakable manifestation of his power.”

³⁴ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 415; “incomparable pleasure”; “she had been seized by a terrible pleasure, so acute that she felt herself laughing with joy despite herself.”

³⁵ Nietzsche, *Tragedy*, 25, 114.

³⁶ “The terror, for her, was so sweet”; “she was [...] all the more happy that [the torture] had been crueler and longer.”

³⁷ “Masculine behavior”; “a naturally trained bird of prey.”

³⁸ Dworkin, “Victim,” 11; Nathaniel Brown and Rebecca Blevins Faery, “The Total ‘O’: Dream or Nightmare?” *Mosaic* 17, no. 2 (1984): 201.

hosts penetrate her, they “l’avaient prise” (32).³⁹ The loaded term “prendre,” or “to take,” employed similarly to “vanquish,” is frequently used to describe any kind of sexual interaction, and alternates with “posséder,” or “to possess”: for example, in wanting to sleep with Jacqueline, O experiences “le violent désir de posséder Jacqueline coûte que coûte” (142).⁴⁰ Both the verbs “prendre” and “posséder” feature in French translations of Nietzsche’s expositions on gender relations.⁴¹ When an anonymous Roissy lover penetrates her, “au premier coup elle cria, comme sous le fouet, puis à chaque coup” (51).⁴² In *Histoire d’O*, as for Nietzsche, all sexuality, sexuality in general, always means “lust of domination.”⁴³ Even the experience of love is an exercise in dominance and submission. O recalls that when she and René first fell in love, “René se jeta sur elle comme un forban sur une captive, et elle devint captive avec délices, sentant à ses poignets, à ses chevilles, à tous ses membres et au plus secret de son corps et de son cœur les liens plus invisibles que les plus fins cheveux, plus puissants que les câbles dont les Lilliputiens avaient ligoté Gulliver, que son amant serrait ou desserrait d’un regard. Elle n’était plus libre? Ah! Dieu merci, elle n’était plus libre” (107–8).⁴⁴

Love frames O’s entire sadomasochistic trajectory. When she returns from Roissy, René tells her “tout d’abord qu’il ne fallait pas qu’elle se crût libre désormais. A cela près qu’elle était libre de ne plus l’aimer, et de le quitter aussitôt. Mais si elle l’aimait, elle n’était libre de rien” (72).⁴⁵ Sir Stephen reprimands O—“vous confondez l’amour et l’obéissance”—but as the story unfolds, it is apparent that, for O, love is more enslaving than her metal chains, more electrifying than the whip, in the same way that love, for Nietzsche, produces aesthetic intoxication fuelled by a cruel exchange of power (102).⁴⁶ Love is also central to violent sexuality in *L’image*. Jean observes that Anne’s moan of pain “ressemblait à un râle d’amour,” and when Jean dominates Claire in the novel’s final scene, he commands her to declare her love for him.⁴⁷ Jean’s dominance over Claire culminates in his triumphant description: “lorsque je l’ai pénétrée pour de bon, elle s’est aussitôt mise à gémir, m’appelant par mon prénom et me répétant qu’elle m’aimait” (183).⁴⁸ This final moment, dripping with romantic sentimentality, also

³⁹ “He took her breasts”; “have taken her.”

⁴⁰ “The violent desire to possess Jacqueline at all costs.”

⁴¹ For example, the French translation of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* details: “la femme veut être prise, être comprise comme possession, elle veut s’identifier au concept de ‘possession,’ de ‘possédé’; elle veut par conséquent quelqu’un qui *prenne*.” Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Le gai savoir*, ed. and trans. Patrick Wotling (Paris: Flammarion, 1997), 324.

⁴² “At the first blow she screamed, as if under the whip, then again with each strike.”

⁴³ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 415.

⁴⁴ “René threw himself on her like a pirate on a prisoner, and she became a prisoner with delight, feeling on her wrists, on her ankles, on all of her limbs and at the most secret parts of her body and her heart, the bonds more invisible than the finest strands of hair, more powerful than the cables used by the Lilliputians to tie down Gulliver, which her lover tightened and loosened with a glance. She was no longer free? Ah! Thank God, she was no longer free.”

⁴⁵ “First of all, from now on, she must not believe herself to be free. Except that she was free to no longer love him, and to leave him immediately. But if she loved him, she was in no way free.”

⁴⁶ “You’re confusing love and obedience.”

⁴⁷ Berg, *L’image*, 116; “resembled a gasp of love.”

⁴⁸ “When I penetrated her for good, she immediately started moaning and repeated to me that she loved me.”

suggests that *L'image* follows *Histoire d'O*—and Nietzsche—in conflating violent sexuality and sexuality *tout court*.

Openness and unity

The effect of the violent sexual aesthetic experience is the dissolution and reconstruction of subjectivity. The dissolution of O's individual subjectivity is a result of the Dionysian aesthetic's destruction of the Apollonian *principium individuationis*. Although, as many have pointed out, the issue of consent in *Histoire d'O* is not uncomplicated, O's self-dissolution must be recognized as intentional, for, as Charney succinctly notes, "the novel insists on O's free will. It is essential that her self-annihilation and quest for anonymity be a voluntary act";⁴⁹ in this respect, the violent sexuality that envelops O cannot be deemed comparable with non-consensual forms of sexual violence and abuse. O relinquishes her body to her lovers, and it is made clear that giving up ownership of one's body means divorcing that body from one's notion of self, as the following monologue, delivered to O upon her arrival to Roissy, demonstrates:

Vos mains ne sont pas à vous, ni vos seins, ni tout particulièrement aucun des orifices de votre corps, que nous pouvons fouiller et dans lesquels nous pouvons nous enfoncer à notre gré. Par manière de signe, pour qu'il vous soit constamment présent à l'esprit, ou aussi présent que possible, que vous avez perdu le droit de vous dérober, devant nous vous ne fermerez jamais tout à fait les lèvres, ni ne croiserez les jambes, ni ne serrerez les genoux [...] qui marquera à vos yeux et aux nôtres que votre bouche, votre ventre, et vos reins nous sont ouverts. Devant nous, vous ne toucherez jamais à vos seins: ils sont exhaussés par le corset pour nous appartenir.⁵⁰

At Sannois, O is tied to an apparatus that spreads her legs so widely that the sense of her submission dissolves her consciousness of self: "c'était vrai qu'elle ne pouvait songer à rien d'autre [...] qu'au fait qu'elle était ouverte [...] A rien d'autre qu'à son esclavage" (166).⁵¹ The same effect is produced by other physical symbols of her enslavement: "elle ne sentait plus que le collier, les bracelets, et la chaîne" (45).⁵² The chains that hold O in bondage, "qui auraient dû la ligoter au fond d'elle-même [...] tout au contraire la

⁴⁹ Charney, "Erotic Sainthood," 66.

⁵⁰ Réage, *Histoire d'O*, 37; "your hands are not your own, nor are your breasts, nor in particular are any of your body's orifices, which we can explore and which we can penetrate at will. As a sign, so that it will be constantly present in your mind, or as present as possible, that you have lost the right to conceal yourself, before us you will never close your lips entirely, nor cross your legs, nor press your knees together [...] which will signal to your eyes and to ours that your mouth, your belly, and your backside are open to us. Before us, you will never touch your breasts; they are raised by the corset so that they belong to us."

⁵¹ "It was true that she could think of nothing else [...] than the fact that she was open [...] of nothing else than her slavery."

⁵² "She no longer felt anything except the collar, the bracelets, and the chain."

délivraient d'elle-même" (58–9).⁵³ In one instance, the pain of having her buttocks branded with Sir Stephen's initials causes O to lose consciousness entirely, but more profound is the way in which, still physically conscious, she loses awareness of her individual self: "sous les regards, sous les mains, sous les sexes qui l'outrageaient, sous les fouets qui la déchiraient, elle se perdait dans une délirante absence d'elle-même qui la rendait à l'amour, et l'approchait peut-être de la mort. Elle était n'importe qui, elle était n'importe laquelle des autres filles, ouvertes et forcées comme elle" (170, 59).⁵⁴

As this final sentence indicates, it is specifically the knowledge of her *individual* self that O loses. Sir Stephen's mid-morning visit to O's apartment, which initially stokes her self-consciousness, signifies the point at which the Apollonian daylight world will begin to adopt the character, or "speak the language," of the Dionysian. This is why, in the novel's final sequence, "ce fut seulement le plein jour venu" that Sir Stephen and the Commander "la possédèrent tour à tour" (200, 201).⁵⁵ When Dionysian consciousness colors the Apollonian realm, O's quest has reached its pinnacle. The pervasiveness of the Dionysian state is reflected in the written style of the final paragraph. While an omniscient narrator conveys O's inner experience throughout the novel, the following paragraph is free from O's subjectivity; O is now a subject-less object for her lovers and her readers alike: "*dans un dernier chapitre, qui a été supprimé, O retournait à Roissy, où Sir Stephen l'abandonnait. Il existe une seconde fin à l'histoire d'O. C'est que, se voyant sur le point d'être quittée par Sir Stephen, elle préféra mourir. Il y consentit*" (202).⁵⁶

Through the dissolution of her individual subjectivity, O becomes one with all that exists, her identity refashioned as an expression of the metaphysical primordial will that embodies the unity of all things. This fusion with the totality, the source of O's ecstasy, is conveyed through the trope of openness, which is a popular reading of O's initial. The intensification of O's sexual slavery heightens her openness; "open and enslaved make for a difficult paradox, but to be completely accessible and available is also to remove all barriers between oneself and the world."⁵⁷ The imperative of openness is declared during O's first night at Roissy and is reiterated by René upon her return home, whereupon O observes that "le mot 'ouvrir' et l'expression 'ouvre les jambes' se chargeaient dans la bouche de son amant de tant de trouble et de pouvoir."⁵⁸ To be open metaphysically means being opened physically: O must never wear clothes that close or contain her body (73–4), so underwear and pants are forbidden, while skirts, bras, and blouses must be able to be raised or opened easily. O's thighs must never close, and she is rendered

⁵³ "Which should have bound her to the depths of herself [...] quite on the contrary delivered her from herself."

⁵⁴ "Beneath the stares, beneath the hands, beneath the sexes that violated her, beneath the whips that rent her, she lost herself in a delirious absence of herself that returned her to love, and drew her, perhaps, to death. She was anyone, she was any one of the other girls, open and forced like her."

⁵⁵ "It was only in broad daylight"; "possessed her one after the other."

⁵⁶ "In the final chapter, which has been suppressed, O returned to Roissy, where Sir Stephen abandoned her. There exists a second ending to the story of O. It is that, upon seeing herself on the point of being left by Sir Stephen, she preferred to die. To this he consented."

⁵⁷ Charney, "Erotic Sainthood," 69.

⁵⁸ Réage, *Histoire d'O*, 73; "the word 'open' and the expression 'open your legs' were charged in the mouth of her lover with so much turmoil and power."

“doublement ouverte” with the widening of her anus (63).⁵⁹ O is no longer an individual, and thus no longer closed, reveling in the way in which “il n’avait avec elle aucun ménagement à garder, aucune limite à la façon dont, sur son corps, il pouvait chercher son plaisir” (189–90).⁶⁰ The novel’s terminology suggests that the primordial unity that O becomes open to is indeed a Nietzschean form of the Schopenhauerean will reflected in the bodies of her lovers: in relation to René, O feels “totalement livrée à une volonté qui n’était pas la sienne” and in Sir Stephen she perceives “une volonté ferme et glacée” (76, 99).⁶¹ This reflection of the will is the referent of O’s instruction that the sexual cruelty she endures is “beaucoup moins de vous faire éprouver une douleur, crier ou répandre des larmes, que de vous faire sentir, par le moyen de cette douleur, que vous êtes contrainte, et de vous enseigner que vous êtes entièrement vouée à quelque chose qui est en dehors de vous” (38).⁶² The union between O and her lovers achieved through openness, and configured through Nietzsche’s conception of masterful masculinity and submissive femininity, equates not simply to a “partial exchange of identities,” as Bersani suggests, but to a complete fusion.⁶³

At Roissy, O is united with her lovers through the bodies of other men, demonstrating that connection with the will means unification with other humans: “il participait par principe à n’importe quoi qu’on pût exiger d’elle ou lui infliger, et que c’était lui qui la possédait et jouissait d’elle à travers ceux aux mains de qui elle était remise, du seul fait qu’il la leur avait remise. Elle devait leur être soumise et les accueillir avec le même respect avec lequel elle l’accueillait, comme autant d’images de lui” (52).⁶⁴ The hands of her Roissy lovers “étaient ses mains, leurs ordres ses ordres” (97).⁶⁵ The union O achieves with René transcends the physical limits imposed by individuality and it also transforms all involved participants into, effectively, a single metaphysical being. Just as O achieves unity with certain lovers through sexual encounters with other men, so too does she serve as a means for the unification of others. O’s sexual encounters with women bind her conquests to her male lovers: “il lui semblait en outre que les filles qu’elle caressait appartenaient de droit à l’homme à qui elle-même appartenait, et qu’elle n’était là que par procuration” (194).⁶⁶ O’s submission to Sir Stephen unites him with René: “elle se

⁵⁹ “Doubly open.”

⁶⁰ “With her there was no caution to maintain, no limit in the way in which, with her body, [Sir Stephen] could seek his pleasure.”

⁶¹ “Totally delivered to a will that was not her own”; a “firm and icy will.” “Volonté” was also the term used in French translations of Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* and Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation*.

⁶² “Much less to have you experience pain, scream, or spill tears, than to have you feel, by way of this pain, that you are constrained, and to teach you that you are entirely devoted to something outside of yourself.”

⁶³ Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astynax: Character and Desire in Literature* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976).

⁶⁴ “He participated in principle in anything that one could demand of or inflict upon her, and it was he who possessed her or enjoyed her through those into whose hands she had been given, simply because he had given her to them. She had to submit to them and receive them with the same respect with which she received [René], like so many images of him.”

⁶⁵ “Were [René’s] hands, their orders his orders.”

⁶⁶ “It seemed to her, moreover, that the girls she caressed belonged by right to the man to whom she belonged, and that she was there solely by proxy.”

rendait compte que sous les espèces de son corps entre eux partagé, ils atteignaient à quelque chose de plus mystérieux et peut-être de plus aigu qu'une communion amoureuse" (118).⁶⁷ O becomes, in Nietzschean terms, "a medium, the channel" for "artistic projections for the true creator of art."⁶⁸

The unity of all beings, accessed through Dionysian aesthetic experience, is also conveyed through the theme of anonymity, which features in condemnatory feminist observations that O's body is merely "a body."⁶⁹ Yet anonymity is not simply a feature of misogynistic oppression: it operates in the novel to suggest that, when stripped of the illusion of individuality, all humans are interconnected within a primordial unity. O becomes aware of her own anonymity, her exchangeability, as she watches René fondle the Roissy servant Jeanne: "quel plaisir lui donnait-elle, elle, que celle-ci, ou une autre, ne lui donnât aussi?"⁷⁰ O is not the only figure to be rendered anonymous: preparing to whip her, the Roissy hosts declare that they "mettraient leurs masques, et qu'elle ne les distinguerait plus" (32).⁷¹ When O is locked in the dungeon, she is blindfolded prior to each man's entrance, so that she "perdit aussi leur compte, et leur nombre, et ses douces mains ni ses lèvres caressant à l'aveugle ne surent jamais reconnaître qui elles touchaient" (68).⁷² All participants in Dionysian sexuality, whether dominant or submissive, become anonymous, exchangeable, as if different forms of a single entity. The violent sexuality of *Histoire d'O*, then, instates the dissolution of individual subjectivity as the interconnection of all humans comes to the fore; bodies become media for the expression of the primordial unity.

Mirror images

Thus, in place of the shattered Apollonian *principium individuationis* is constructed Dionysian unity; O's individual subjectivity is replaced by collective subjectivity. This event is reconciled with the appearance of O's individual body in a way that illustrates Nietzsche's exposition on Archilochus. Despite her self-loss, O, like Archilochus, continues to assert her subjectivity, to say "I," as it were, by acknowledging her appearance in the mirror. The mirror serves as a pervasive symbol. When O arrives at Roissy, female servants attend to O's toilette, seating her before a mirror that covers the entire wall so that O "se voyait, ainsi ouverte, chaque fois que son regard rencontrait la glace" (28).⁷³ With this begins a recurring event: it is a specific wish of her hosts that O should see herself—presumably in a mirror—being whipped (32). After she is whipped,

⁶⁷ "She realized that through the currency of her body shared between them, they attained something more mysterious and perhaps more acute than an amorous communion."

⁶⁸ Nietzsche, *Tragedy*, 32.

⁶⁹ See, for example, Dworkin, "Victim," 109.

⁷⁰ Réage, *Histoire d'O*, 55; "what pleasure did she give him, she, that this girl, or another, did not also give him?"

⁷¹ "Would wear their masks, and that she would no longer be able to distinguish them."

⁷² "Also lost account of them, and their number, and neither her soft hands nor her lips, blindly caressing, could ever recognize who they touched"

⁷³ "Saw herself, thus open, each time her gaze met the mirror."

O goes to urinate in the bathroom and finds that “les parois étaient entièrement revêtues de glace”; Pierre watches her relieve herself, and “elle le voyait dans les miroirs, et se voyait elle-même” (43, 65).⁷⁴ Invading O’s privacy in such a manner is another strategy of possessing O and of stripping her of her self-possession. In each of these instances, O sees an image of herself in the mirror, but this self is a being stripped of individuality, rent by pain, being opened. The mirror gives “sensuous expression,” Apollonian semblance, to O’s Dionysian primal pain and the unity, or openness, inherent to it. This strategy appears at crucial moments in O’s sadomasochistic trajectory. Anne-Marie takes O to view herself in a three-sided mirror before her buttocks are branded with Sir Stephen’s initials. “c’est la dernière fois que tu te vois intacte, lui dit-elle [...] Je te ramènerai devant la glace la veille de ton départ, tu ne te reconnaîtras plus” (168).⁷⁵ Although the being O will see before her will bear a familiar physical appearance, at this point O’s individual subjectivity will have been demolished, and in its place will be a refashioned subjectivity that reflects the collectivity of the primordial will. It is while gazing at her reflection in “un grand miroir à trois faces” in her apartment that O feels herself “totalement livrée à une volonté qui n’était pas la sienne,” suggesting she is aware that the being she sees before her is not, despite its appearance, an individual (75, 76).⁷⁶ The mirror produces a “symbolic dream-image” of “image-less” Dionysian subjectivity, so that a reflection of “the *one* living being,” the primordial will, is reflected again through Apollonian semblance.⁷⁷

O also gains knowledge of herself as a collective rather than an individual subject through her recognition of others as such, an event that is also worked through the mirror trope, as demonstrated in the following passage: “ce qui manquait à O n’était pas à proprement parler Jacqueline, mais l’usage d’un corps de fille, dont elle pût faire ce qu’elle voulût [...] O n’était pas tellement amoureuse de Jacqueline, ni d’ailleurs de Natalie, ni d’aucune fille en particulier, mais seulement des filles en tant que telles, et comme on peut être amoureuse de sa propre image” (193).⁷⁸ Dionysian lust renders women anonymous, exchangeable, and hence collective, and through the mirror image they provide O of herself, O recognizes her own status as such. Conversely, when O sees herself in the mirror she recognizes the anonymous, united mass of women to which she belongs: “la beauté des autres femmes[...] la rassurait cependant sur sa propre beauté, où elle voyait, s’apercevant dans des glaces inhabituelles, comme un reflet de la leur” (113).⁷⁹ O’s lack of individual subjectivity is, in Griffin’s words, “mirrored back by every character in the novel,” but this represents more than simply

⁷⁴ “The walls were covered entirely with mirrors”; “she saw him in the mirrors, and she saw herself.”

⁷⁵ “‘This is the last time that you will see yourself intact,’ she told her [...] ‘I will bring you in front of the mirror the day before your departure, you will no longer recognize yourself.’”

⁷⁶ “A large three-sided mirror”; “totally delivered to a will that was not her own.”

⁷⁷ Nietzsche, *Tragedy*, 81.

⁷⁸ “What O missed was not, properly speaking, Jacqueline, but the use of a girl’s body, with which she could do whatever she pleased [...] O was not so much in love with Jacqueline, nor for that matter with Natalie, nor with any girl in particular, but only with girls as such, and as one can be in love with one’s own image.”

⁷⁹ “The beauty of other women[...] reassured her, however, of her own beauty, in which she saw, upon noticing herself in the occasional mirror, a kind of reflection of theirs.”

degradation.⁸⁰ Through the mirror trope, the Dionysian expression of the will, the “only ‘I’-ness which truly exists,” is given a second reflection in the image of Apollonian semblance.⁸¹

The dissolution of individual subjectivity and the refashioning of collective subjectivity is also experienced by Anne in *L'image*. Statements such as “jamais elle n'avait eu d'aussi beaux yeux[...] baignés de terreur et d'abandon” and “la petite Anne se laissait faire avec abandon” point to a loss of subjectivity through a loss of self-possession.⁸² Anne's loss of self is also suggested in the orgasm that overcomes her following a sadomasochistic exploit, which is truly a “little death”: “j'ai vu la fille s'agiter en cadence, puis lancer la tête à droite et à gauche en crispant les doigts. Enfin elle a étendu les jambes et s'est tournée d'un seul coup sur le côté, courbée en deux, immobile sur le damier noir et blanc. Claire, debout au-dessus d'elle, la déplaçait comme une morte, avec la pointe de son soulier” (168).⁸³

The whipping that follows is one of “sacrifice” and, afterwards, Jean “l'[a] violée, sans égard pour ses souffrances, la pénétrant, à moitié morte, par l'orifice le plus étroit” (170, 173).⁸⁴ Yet Anne does not die; she is, as “P. R.”—Alain Robbe-Grillet—notes in the preface, “immolé sans cesse et toujours renaissant,” and it is through openness that she is refashioned with collective subjectivity (12).⁸⁵ Anne, like O, is instructed to keep her legs open, and “ne devait porter ni chemise ni slip, ni rien de ce genre” with her skirts and dresses, and even her garter belts required “des larges échancrures, par derrière comme par devant” (62, 127, 129).⁸⁶ The notion that beneath the Apollonian semblance of individuality lies a unity between all beings is, in *L'image* as in *Histoire d'O*, suggested by the mirror metaphor. Anne is Claire's “miroir,” an “‘image’ or ‘projection’ sent out ahead to teach the narrator how to love [Claire.]”⁸⁷ Anne and Claire are different forms of the same entity, rendered interchangeable by the same sadomasochistic desire, an interchangeability that is signified by Claire's subtle inclusion of an image of her own submissive body among those of Anne. When Claire seeks Jean's compliments about her model, she is clearly seeking evidence of his desire for herself through Anne. Just as Anne's body forms a medium for the union of Claire and Jean, Claire becomes a medium for the connection of Jean and Anne, as Claire indicates that Anne must submit to Jean through her own command (115). It is in the final chapter that Claire's

⁸⁰ Griffin, *Pornography*, 226.

⁸¹ Nietzsche, *Tragedy*, 31.

⁸² Berg, *L'image*, 51, 151; “she had never had such beautiful eyes [...] bathed in terror and abandon”; “the little Anne gave herself up with abandon”

⁸³ “I saw the girl writhing rhythmically, then throwing her head right and left while clenching her fingers. Finally she stretched out her legs and, in one motion, turned on her side, bent in two, motionless on the black and white checkered floor. Claire, standing above her, pushed her like a corpse with the point of her shoe.”

⁸⁴ “Violated her, without consideration for her suffering, penetrating her, half dead, through the most narrow orifice.”

⁸⁵ “Ceaselessly sacrificed and always reborn.”

⁸⁶ “Couldn't wear shirts, nor underwear, nor anything of that kind”; “large apertures, both in the front and back.”

⁸⁷ Berg, *L'image*, 62; Susan Sontag, “The Pornographic Imagination,” in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), 64; “mirror.”

Apollonian self-possession finally shatters entirely: she stares at Jean “de ses yeux agrandis, qu’elle m’abandonnait,” her constricting Apollonian apparel replaced with “du linge tout pareil à celui de son modèle. Elle n’avait pas de culotte, elle non plus” (179, 180).⁸⁸ Jean’s commands have the same emphasis as René’s: “écarte les jambes! . . . La bouche ouverte!” (181).⁸⁹ As in *Histoire d’O*, Dionysian sadomasochism in *L’image* dissolves individual subjectivity and reconstructs collective subjectivity, enabling and revealing the unity between beings. In both novels, subjectivity is never contained to a single state, but is shifting and unstable, dissolving and reforming anew, denying the possibility of a core self and subjective essence.

Dreams and stories

In *Histoire d’O*, the mirror trope is used to show the way in which Dionysian unity, a reflection of the will, is reflected for a second time through the Apollonian expression of individuality, demonstrating that “the ground of things” is always bound within layers of appearance. In deploying the metaphysical discourse of *The Birth of Tragedy*, this novel also refuses to posit the notion of metaphysical truth underlying appearance.⁹⁰ The state of unity that O achieves through Dionysian sadomasochistic experience, although it shatters the illusion of Apollonian semblance, is only ever an expression, a copy, a reflection of the truth of the will, true only in its distinction from its Apollonian other. Thus, throughout the novel O inhabits what René “appelait à juste titre sa véritable condition,” but such claims to truth are undermined by O’s failure to distinguish between reality and dream when reflecting upon her violent sexual experiences.⁹¹ At Roissy, O reflects, she had been “protégée par une invraisemblance qui tenait du rêve, par le sentiment qu’elle existait dans une autre vie, et peut-être qu’elle n’existait pas,” but then considers that her few weeks at Roissy did constitute reality “dans un cercle fermé, dans un univers clos” (90–1).⁹² The Dionysian experience of Roissy is thus both dream and contingent reality. Upon bringing her enslaved status outside Roissy, she anticipates that this uncertain reality will engulf her everyday life, “ne plus se contenter de signes” (91).⁹³ O thinks that by making sexual enslavement a feature of the everyday, the dream-state that Roissy signified will be suspended, “en admettant, ce qu’elle se disait maintenant, que ce fût bien le dénouement, et qu’un autre ne se cachât point derrière celui-là, et peut-être un autre encore derrière le suivant” (91).⁹⁴ Sadomasochistic existence, violent

⁸⁸ “With widened eyes, which she abandoned to me”; “clothes very similar to those of her model. She, too, wore no underwear.”

⁸⁹ “Open your legs! . . . Mouth open!”

⁹⁰ Nietzsche, *Tragedy*, 31.

⁹¹ Réage, *Histoire d’O*, 177; “called, rightly, her true condition.”

⁹² “Protected by an improbability that was like a dream, by the feeling that she existed in another life, and perhaps that she didn’t exist at all”; “in an exclusive circle, in a closed universe.”

⁹³ “No longer content with signs.”

⁹⁴ “Admitting, she now said to herself, that this really was the finale, and that there was not another that hid behind this one, and perhaps another still behind the next.”

sexuality, for O, is a web of semblance underlying semblance in which classifications of reality and dream are always tremulous. O's inability to distinguish between the two states is reiterated during Sir Stephen's eventful morning visit. For O, this visit means that her violent sexual trysts will no longer be constrained to "la nuit, participant par là du rêve" as they were at Roissy (123); yet she quickly undermines this reference to a dream-state by deciding that "la réalité de la nuit et la réalité du jour seraient la même réalité" (124).⁹⁵ Reality is always a dream, and the totality of the dream the only certain reality. At Sir Stephen's villa, O listens to a conversation he has with the Commander: "ce fut dans un rêve [...] qu'elle entendit l'étranger faire compliment d'elle à Sir Stephen insistant sur l'agrément des seins un peu lourds et de la taille étroite, des fers plus épais, plus longs et plus visibles qu'il n'était coutume [...] Sur quoi Sir Stephen, la prenant par la nuque, lui dit doucement de se réveiller" (192).⁹⁶

The authenticity of O's experience is always contingent, and thus it remains uncertain whether O will awaken to reality, or whether, as she has considered, there is only semblance that underlies semblance. Notions of absolute truth and being are also destabilized through the pervasive metafictional tone of the novel, which colors the novel's title, *Histoire d'O*. The term "histoire" and the English translation "story" do not delineate between a fictional or true account of events, but they do indicate that the content of the story will be relayed through a semiotic construct. Any truth will always manifest through interpretation and creation, and is thus always contingent, never absolute. The novel's metafictional tone is evident in sentences such as "je sais qu'elles ont défait les mains d'O qui étaient toujours liées derrière le dos" and "je ne sais pas combien de temps elle est restée dans le boudoir rouge," in which the omniscient narrator declares its own presence and thus also the novel's status as representation (28, 29).⁹⁷ The lack of ontological certainty is emphasized by the metafictional bookending devices: near the beginning of the novel, the narrator announces that "une autre version du même début était plus brutale et plus simple," and, at the end, it declares: "*il existe une seconde fin à l'histoire d'O*" (27, 202).⁹⁸ Not only does this destabilize narrative authority, as Noyes observes,⁹⁹ but, replicating the Apollo/Dionysus duality and its inherent ontological instability on a structural level, the novel indicates to the reader that the story it contains is only one version of events, only one interpretation, never final or certain. In *Histoire d'O*, one mode of identity is always at risk of dissolving and giving way to another, and both individual and collective forms of subjectivity are

⁹⁵ "The night, thereby participating in a dream"; "the reality of the night and the reality of the day would be the same reality."

⁹⁶ "It was in a dream [...] that she heard the stranger compliment Sir Stephen on her, insisting on the harmony between her slightly heavy breasts and her narrow waist, her irons thicker, longer, and more visible than was customary [...] whereupon Sir Stephen, taking her by the nape of her neck, softly told her to wake up."

⁹⁷ "I know that they untied O's hands that were still bound behind her back"; "I don't know for how long she stayed in the red boudoir."

⁹⁸ "Another version of the same beginning was more brutal and more simple"; "*there exists a second ending to the story of O*."

⁹⁹ John Noyes, *The Mastery of Submission: Inventions of Masochism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

always only appearances or expressions of truth. As in Nietzsche's own appraisal of *The Birth of Tragedy*, violent sexuality in *Histoire d'O* ensures that "the contrast of a true and of an apparent world is entirely absent."¹⁰⁰

The same indivisibility between real and unreal is echoed in *L'image*. In this novel, Claire's photographs, which signify the Apollonian realm of semblance, operate in parallel to the characters' lived experience. Every photograph in the series features Anne in a submissive position, except the last one, which features Claire, and this pattern mimics the structure of the story: Jean witnesses a series of events featuring Anne's submission, noting that the positions she assumes imitate those in the photographs, until it is, finally, Claire who submits in the final chapter. The "real" sadomasochistic scenes echo the photographic images, and thus "the line that separates the real world from the photographed images of it is intentionally blurred."¹⁰¹ This notion is reiterated through Jean's appraisal of Claire's photographs. Jean realizes that he has already seen the images in the Montmartre bookshop. Upon his second viewing, he remarks that: "je n'avais pas été très frappé, alors, par ces images, les poses m'en ayant eu l'air assez courantes et sans intérêt spécial. Cette fois-ci, au contraire, elles m'apparaissaient sous un tout autre jour [...] je m'apercevais surtout, à présent, de leur netteté extraordinaire, alors que les mauvaises épreuves précédemment contemplées n'en rendaient pas du tout le caractère de réalité flagrante, plus vraie, presque plus palpable, que la nature elle-même."¹⁰² Despite seeming "plus vraie" than the other copies he has seen, Jean is "sûr qu'il s'agissait bien des mêmes clichés" (84).¹⁰³ But any ontological certainty Jean establishes is quickly undercut as he recognizes the Apollonian semblance that gives "sensuous expression" to Dionysian desires:

Cette image, d'une horreur très attirante, malgré son romantisme exagéré, ne pouvait être que le résultat d'un truquage. Les deux blessures et le sang répandu avaient été sans aucun doute dessinés, avec de la peinture rouge, sur le corps complaisant de la petite Anne. Mais c'était fait avec tant de soin que l'on s'y trompait aisément, d'autant plus que les contorsions de la victime réussissaient très bien à donner le change [...]. En tout cas, loin d'être brouillées par leurs dessins, les lignes harmonieuses du corps s'en trouvaient au contraire rehaussées d'un nouvel éclat. (95–6)¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 289.

¹⁰¹ Charney, "Erotic Sainthood," 53.

¹⁰² Berg, *L'image*, 83–4; "I had not been particularly struck, then, by these images, these poses having seemed to me quite common and without any special interest. This time, on the contrary, they appeared to me in a whole new light [...] I especially noticed, now, their extraordinary clarity, while the average prints previously contemplated hadn't conveyed at all this character of flagrant reality, more real, almost more palpable, than nature itself."

¹⁰³ "Sure that they were the same photos."

¹⁰⁴ "This image, with its very attractive horror, despite its exaggerated romanticism, could only have been the result of manipulation. The two wounds and the spilled blood had been without doubt drawn with red paint on the obliging body of the little Anne. But it was done with so much care that one could have been easily fooled, all the more so as the contortions of the victim were very effective in their deception [...] In any case, far from being obscured by their drawings, the harmonious lines of the body were, in contrast, enhanced with a new splendor."

Just as Jean doubts the authenticity of images that are “plus vraie [...] que la nature elle-même” (84)¹⁰⁵—although nature’s authenticity, we recall, has already been destabilized through the association with the Apollonian mirror in the urination scene—so too does he doubt the legitimacy of lived experience. Observing Anne, Jean thinks “on devinait quelle ne portait pas de soutien-gorge. Ou bien était-ce seulement l’imagination?” (48).¹⁰⁶ When Anne and Jean meet at Montmartre, Anne’s Apollonian coldness dispels Jean’s certainty of his dominant role: “la situation n’était pas, en somme, celle que j’imaginai. J’étais agacé et déçu. J’ai décidé de ne plus me soucier de ces deux filles, ni de toute cette histoire absurde” (76–7).¹⁰⁷ The final term in this sentence serves as a metadiscursive reference to *L’image* as a work of fiction, and such references are also apparent in the chapter titles. The title of Chapter 10, “Tout rentre dans l’ordre” consciously and ironically references literary narrative conventions.¹⁰⁸ The title of chapter four, “Faux mouvements” echoes the metafictional double beginning of *Histoire d’O*, and the name of chapter nine, “La chambre gothique,” references a particular aesthetic cliché that coheres with the “romantisme exagéré” that Jean observes in the sadomasochistic scenes depicted in photographs and in lived experience (96, 49, 111).¹⁰⁹ “Real life,” stylized photography, and the novel itself are posited within the sphere of aesthetic representation.

L’image, like *Histoire d’O*, then, refuses any clear distinction between authenticity and appearance, enacting Nietzsche’s critique of metaphysical truth through its construction of violent sexuality as an aesthetic experience, whose purpose is to refashion subjectivity in a way that shatters the semblance of Apollonian individuality but that fails to find a more authentic self in the collective subjectivity created in its place. Founded upon Nietzsche’s aesthetic philosophy, these texts, like Bataille’s *L’Érotisme*, suggest that subjectivity, like truth, is always provisional, lacking an essential core in its persistent sadomasochistic trajectory of creation and destruction.

The central principles of Nietzsche’s aesthetic philosophy are pertinent to postmodern aesthetics of the late twentieth century, despite the way in which the latter breaks with previous aesthetic paradigms in several ways. Thus far in this book I have tracked modern aesthetics from its eighteenth-century birth as a universalizing moral apparatus, through its late-nineteenth-century aestheticist incarnation as a vehicle for immoral self-identification and individuation, to its Nietzschean transformation into a force of nature directing the dissolution and recreation of subjectivity. Late twentieth-century aesthetics repudiate any psychological hermeneutics of aesthetic judgment or experience in their wholesale rejection of depth and their celebration of appearances and surface matter. In this aesthetic moment, surfaces are devoid of beauty, a category that has, up to this point, held a crucial position within aesthetic philosophy. In postmodern aesthetics, Nietzsche’s strategy of undermining ontological stability and

¹⁰⁵ “More real [...] than nature itself.”

¹⁰⁶ “One could tell that she wasn’t wearing a bra. Or was that only my imagination?”

¹⁰⁷ “The situation was not, in short, that which I had imagined. I was annoyed and disappointed. I decided not to worry any more about these two girls, or about the whole absurd story.”

¹⁰⁸ “Everything returns to normal”

¹⁰⁹ “False movements”; “The gothic chamber”; “Exaggerated romanticism.”

truth is pushed to its extreme conclusions: his Apollonian aesthetic, with its emphasis on image and illusion, underpins Baudrillard's notions of seduction and the *trompe l'œil*, Foucault's notion of similitude, and Butler's conception of aesthetically-constituted gender identity. As in Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian dichotomy, postmodern aesthetics forbid any clear distinction between appearance and authenticity but assert that artifice lies at the heart of what is known as authentic. While the work of Bataille, Réage, and Berg enacts Nietzsche's critique of metaphysical truth through the violent obliteration and reconstruction of subjectivity, the "postmodern" construction of sadomasochism, as I will demonstrate in the following chapter, negates the notion of essential truth by showing that what is constructed as natural or real—in this instance, power—is, in fact, an assemblage of signs, constituted through artifice.

Sadomasochism as anti-aesthetic theater

Replication or refusal? Sadomasochism and patriarchy in the sex wars

Andrea Dworkin's and Carol Cosman's 1974 essays on *Histoire d'O*, which launched a monolithic attack on the novel, also flamed a widespread condemnation of "real" sadomasochist practices, particularly those involving women. Both forms of criticism were driven by the same logic: that sadomasochist practice encapsulates or is symptomatic of the patriarchal oppression of women. This critique intensified in tandem with the growing visibility of female practitioners of sadomasochism, visibility that was aided in particular by the formation of support and social groups in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Samois, a San Francisco-based support group for lesbian sadomasochists, was consolidated in 1978 and named after the title, provided in the English translation of *Histoire d'O*, of Anne-Marie's château. This group released its first publication in the following year, a booklet called *What Color is Your Handkerchief: a Lesbian S/M Sexuality Reader*. In 1981, a group with similar goals was formed: New York's Lesbian Sex Mafia, which remains operative today. These groups, and the practices they support(ed), drew impassioned opposition from several key feminist organizations, namely, the National Organization of Women (NOW), Women Against Violence and Pornography in the Media (WAVPM), and Woman Against Pornography (WAP). The figure of the lesbian sadomasochist—generally supported in the pro-sex factions of what were popularly known as the feminist "sex wars" of the 1980s—was considered poisonous to radical feminism's conception of lesbianism as the "essence of liberation," blackening what was considered to be "egalitarian, nurturing [...] selfless and kind" female sexuality with the violence and selfishness of male libido.¹ The vitriol

¹ Lynda Hart, *Between the Body and the Flesh: Performing Sadomasochism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 54; Kwok Lei Leng, "Sex and Sexualities: Contemporary Feminist Debates," in *Contemporary Australian Feminism 2*, ed. Kate Pritchard Hughes (South Melbourne: Longman, 1997), 83.

directed at Samois was further provoked by the group's feminist identification: although Gayle Rubin, who founded Samois alongside Patrick (then Pat) Califia, argues that there "is nothing inherently feminist or non-feminist about S/M," Samois' booklet *What Color is Your Handkerchief* states that "S/M can and should be consistent with the principles of feminism" and that "SAMOIS HAS A UNIQUE RESPONSIBILITY TO DEVELOP A LESBIAN-FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE ON S/M."²

The arguments for and against sadomasochism circulating within the United States during this time, voiced in newspapers, meetings, and at public rallies, are encapsulated in Samois' 1981 publication *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, a collection of polemical essays, celebratory fiction, poetry, and images, and in *Against Sadomasochism*, an anthology published in the following year by several members of WAVPM. The introductory statement in *Against Sadomasochism*, that "sadomasochism reflects the power asymmetries embedded in most of our social relationships," is typical of the sentiment expressed throughout the work.³ Many of the book's contributors hold that sadomasochistic desire results from a woman's internalization of social power dynamics, "an internalization [...] that [in turn reinforces] the legitimacy of power imbalances outside the bedroom."⁴ This etiology, which was not restricted to explaining only women's desire, has a distinctly pathological tone, evidenced in Susan Griffin's statement, made in 1980, that "the whole culture is S/M, we're sadomasochists. The people in SAMOIS, or gay people who wear leather, have a more severe form of the disease."⁵ This was not the first time that this kind of argument had been asserted: in 1935, psychoanalyst Karen Horney wrote about the cultural conditions, including gender relations, that she saw as influencing the prevalence of female masochism.⁶ In 1969, sexologist Paul Gebhard wrote that "sadomasochism is embedded in our culture [...] even our gender relationships have been formulated in a framework conducive to sadomasochism: the male is supposed to be dominant and aggressive sexually and the female reluctant or submissive."⁷ Yet it was within the context of radical feminism in the late 1970s and early 1980s that the ideas of a sadomasochistic society and psychological internalization would achieve a widespread consensus. This form of diagnosis-as-cultural critique would prove paradigmatic and stubborn, evident in 1993's *Unleashing Feminism: Critiquing Lesbian Sadomasochism in the Gay Nineties*, which states that "most women are conditioned to respond sexually to sadomasochism,"

² Gayle Rubin, "The Leather Menace: Comments on Politics and S/M," in *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, ed. Samois (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987), 215; Samois, *What Color is Your Handkerchief: a Lesbian S/M Sexuality Reader* 1980, 2–3, Box 18, IGIC Ephemera, Organizations: Safesex Leather Sluts – Stonewall, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library.

³ Robin Ruth Linden *et al.*, eds., "Introduction," in *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis* (San Francisco: Frog In The Well, 1982), 4.

⁴ Jeanette Nichols, Darlene Pagano, and Margaret Rossoff, "Is Sadomasochism Feminist? A Critique of the Samois Position," in *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis*, eds. Robin Ruth Linden *et al.* (San Francisco: Frog In The Well, 1982), 140.

⁵ Griffin quoted in Rubin, "Leather Menace," 210.

⁶ Karen Horney, "The Problem of Feminine Masochism," *Psycho-analytic Review* 22 (1935): 241–257.

⁷ Paul H. Gebhard, "Fetishism and Sadomasochism," *Science and Psychoanalysis* 15 (1969): 77.

and in Jeffreys' 2003 book *Unpacking Queer Politics*, which declares that "sadomasochism and other forms of self-harm should be seen as the result of oppressive forces such as sexual abuse, bullying, physical violence, hatred and contempt" and affirms the notion that "subalterns reproduce their own subordination, both intra-psychically [...] and interpersonally."⁸ This logic is still frequently employed today in response to representations or events involving women practicing sadomasochism: a case in point is the largely internet-driven backlash against the 2011 publication of E. L. James' bestselling novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*, much of which follows to the letter the radical feminist model by linking female sadomasochistic desire directly to female submission in a patriarchal society.⁹

To return to the early 1980s when this rationale came to prominence: since radical feminists, in their condemnation of sadomasochism, associate sadomasochist practice with social power systems such as patriarchy, they direct skepticism at attempts to divorce the two, as illustrated by "Judy" Butler in *Against Sadomasochism's* most moderately toned essay, "Lesbian S & M: The Politics of Dis-Illusion." Butler cynically observes the tendency of "sm lesbians ... to make very strong distinctions between what is real power and violence and what is sm power and violence."¹⁰ With this statement, Butler identifies precisely the structuring principle in defenses of sadomasochism typical at the time: to disassociate "real" power from the power involved in sadomasochism. The other key strategy in this defense is to respond to the psychopathological etiology posited by radical feminists by repudiating the relevance of psychic interiority and psychology. Both of these strategies are effected through the trope of performance: for many of the practice's defenders, sadomasochism means performing or play-acting power dynamics. The implications of this notion are significant: as I detail in this chapter, this particular mode of defense produces a construction of sadomasochism as a performance of power, a construction that is integral to contemporary understandings of sadomasochism and that exemplifies the way in which aesthetic sexuality precariously occupies postmodernity. The structure and strategies of this particular form of sadomasochism are elucidated through, and indeed exemplify, postmodern aesthetics, especially those of Jean Baudrillard, who is considered "the postmodernist guru *par excellence*, at least within the Anglo-American configuration of the field."¹¹

⁸ Kathy Miriam, "All the Rage: Lesbian-Feminism, Sadomasochism, and the Politics of Memory," in *Unleashing Feminism: Critiquing Lesbian Sadomasochism in the Gay Nineties*, ed. Irene Reti (Santa Cruz: HerBooks, 1993), 39; Sheila Jeffreys, "Self-Harm or Social Change? Sadomasochism, Cutting and Piercing in Lesbian and Gay Culture," in *Unpacking Queer Politics: A Lesbian Feminist Perspective* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 121; Murray quoted in Jeffreys, "Self-Harm," 119.

⁹ See, for example, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, "Yasmin Alibhai-Brown on Fifty Shades of Grey: Do women really want to be so submissive?" *The Independent*, 1 July, 2012, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/yasmin-alibhai-brown/yasmin-alibhai-brown-on-fifty-shades-of-grey-do-women-really-want-to-be-so-submissive-7902818.html>.

¹⁰ Judy Butler, "Lesbian S & M: The Politics of Dis-Illusion," in *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis*, eds. Robin Ruth Linden et al. (San Francisco: Frog In the Well, 1982), 172.

¹¹ Peter Mortensen, "Beyond 'Civilization's Fear of Nature,'" in *Beyond Postmodernism: Reassessments in Literature, Theory, and Culture*, ed. Klaus Stierstorfer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), 182n.

Baudrillard and postmodern aesthetics

Baudrillard uses the term “seduction” to refer to the allure of signs and images that do not seek to appear real or encompass depth but are explicitly “immoral, frivolous, superficial, and superfluous,” constituting a sphere “formed of artifice, the play of signs.”¹² Baudrillard’s notion of seduction is introduced in his essay “Forget Foucault” (1977), developed most fully in *Seduction* (1979), and elaborated in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), *Simulations* (1983), and in various essays on art written in the 1990s and 2000s. In one of these essays, he asserts that seduction and art are coextensive: “art is profoundly seduction.”¹³ In *Seduction*, Baudrillard illustrates how aesthetics are integral to his concept of seduction by using the art of the *trompe l’œil* to exemplify its principles. Unlike pornography and virtual reality, which, in Baudrillard’s understanding, aim to appear as real as possible, and unlike still-life painting, which “retains the gravity of real things,” the *trompe l’œil* revels in its “weightlessness,” devoid of a “familiar reality,” and repudiates the “representational hierarchy” of traditional aesthetics, in which the artwork is considered a copy of an original or real phenomenon.¹⁴ Nor is the *trompe l’œil* concerned with the privileged categories of “aesthetics proper,” those of beauty and ugliness; it is concerned only with illusion that displays itself as such.¹⁵ Although an inherently aesthetic concept, seduction does not pertain exclusively to traditional aesthetic categories: the *trompe l’œil* is “no longer confined to painting” as there is also “*trompe life*,” signifying that all facets of experience may be encompassed by seduction, including one’s sexuality and one’s body, which become “worked by artifice.”¹⁶ Therefore, if “art is dead,” as Baudrillard declares, it is so only because it dissolves the boundaries of its own category so that all of life falls “under the sign of art, and becomes esthetic [...] and so art is everywhere.”¹⁷ However, for Baudrillard, the aesthetic is not quite as pervasive as he declares: as we shall see, in defining seduction against the sphere of production and the law, he indicates that he views art as distinguished from its unaesthetic others; art is, in fact, not quite everywhere.

Baudrillard’s concept of seduction entails what Jameson would observe in 1984: “a new depthlessness [...] a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum.”¹⁸ In seduction, images and signs do not feign the appearance of depth—there are no “landscapes, skies, vanishing points” in the *trompe l’œil*—and nor are they presented as expressions of a deeper essence. Therefore, in seduction, “*there is no anatomy*, nor psychology,” nor “psychoanalysis [...] with its] hidden excess of meaning” and the

¹² Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 84, 115.

¹³ Jean Baudrillard, “Towards the Vanishing Point of Art (1987),” in *The Conspiracy of Art: Manifestos, Interviews, Essays* ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Ames Hodges (New York: Semiotext(e), 2005), 98.

¹⁴ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 61, 60.

¹⁵ Jean Baudrillard, “Aesthetic Illusion and Disillusion (1995),” in *The Conspiracy of Art: Manifestos, Interviews, Essays*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Ames Hodges (New York: Semiotext(e), 2005), 128.

¹⁶ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 64; Baudrillard, “Aesthetic Illusion,” 128; Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 9.

¹⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 151.

¹⁸ Fredric Jameson, “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 6.

correspondence it posits between truth and depth.¹⁹ In psychoanalysis, “depth always peeks through from behind the break,” but in seduction, “signs themselves [are] more important than the emergence of any truth,” so that any “deeper order (whether conscious or unconscious)” is replaced by “pure appearances” and “play and defiance.”²⁰ In this respect, Baudrillard’s concept of seduction displays what Jameson views as the key characteristic of postmodern culture: that the “hermeneutic model” of inside and outside distinctions and its corresponding divisions between essence and appearance, authenticity and artifice, latency and manifestation, and the notion of repression, have been replaced by pure surface.²¹ Because it fits within the hermeneutic framework, the notion of sexual desire is repudiated in seduction: “for seduction, desire is a myth.”²² Thus, Baudrillard agrees with the central hypothesis of the first volume of Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*—that sexuality has never been repressed—not because discourses producing sexuality have proliferated, as Foucault maintains, but because “sexuality [...] is only *montage* [...] only a simulacrum.”²³ Just as Baudrillard holds that it is a “profound stupidity” to conceive of desire in terms of inner depth and outer expression, so too does he see that it is “a sign of utter foolishness” to “talk about sexuality, ‘repressed’ or not, ‘sublimated’ or not.”²⁴

Despite the disparity Baudrillard posits between his own and Foucault’s stance on repression and sexuality, his notion of seduction’s erasure of depth is anticipated in Foucault’s *This is Not a Pipe*. Examining Magritte’s painting *Les Deux mystères* (1966), Foucault argues that the artist confounds what might otherwise be an obvious interpretation of the work—that it depicts a pipe drawn on a blackboard with a larger pipe floating above and behind it—by challenging the notion of depth that such an interpretation relies upon: “Magritte allows the old space of representation to rule, but only at the surface, no more than a polished stone, bearing words and shapes: beneath, nothing.”²⁵ By depicting the words “Ceci n’est pas une pipe”—“this is not a pipe”—as an image drawn on a blackboard, Magritte, for Foucault, highlights the constructed nature of language and denaturalizes the representative claims made by both language and image. He shows that, in this painting, “nowhere is there a pipe,” that the larger floating pipe, which might appear to be the “real” pipe, in addition to the pipe drawn on a blackboard, “is itself merely a drawing” and “not a pipe.”²⁶ In showing how Magritte’s painting contains its representation purely within its surface, confounding what might otherwise be interpreted as the signification of depth or truth, Foucault prefigures Baudrillard’s assertion that the *trompe l’œil* discards the “old illusions of relief, perspective and depth (spatial and psychological)” so that “the view become[s] operational on the surface of things.”²⁷

¹⁹ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 61–2, 10, 57.

²⁰ Ibid., 53, 117, 21.

²¹ Jameson, “Cultural Logic,” 12.

²² Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 87.

²³ Baudrillard, “Forget Foucault,” in *Forget Foucault* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1987), 29.

²⁴ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 40; Baudrillard, “Forget Foucault,” 29.

²⁵ Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, ed. and trans. James Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 23, 41.

²⁶ Ibid., 23, 29, 30.

²⁷ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 143.

In a similar vein, Jameson suggests that the depthlessness of postmodern culture and aesthetics is created through the erasure of context, an occurrence illustrated by Warhol's painting *Diamond Dust Shoes* (1980), which Jameson contrasts with Van Gogh's *A Pair of Boots* (1887). Van Gogh's modernist depiction of old boots sitting upon the ground invites a "hermeneutical" reading of the image as a symptom of the conditions of its production or the wider social reality it depicts, the painting's "ultimate truth," which, in this example, is the conditions of peasant life.²⁸ In contrast, *Diamond Dust Shoes*, in Jameson's interpretation, depicts a "flattened" array of artificial-looking stilettos that refuse any clues to the larger social context of the image presented or the conditions of its production; there is no "truth" to be interpreted, only an image that serves solely as surface spectacle.²⁹

Production

The repudiation of depth is part of seduction's repudiation of reality: the *trompe l'œil* "does not seek to confuse itself with the real," but, prizing its "play and artifice, it presents itself as a simulacrum."³⁰ In seduction, "objects resemble themselves too much [...] they point to the irony of *too much reality*" and emphasize "its very appearance, its inflections, its nuances, the circulation [...] of signs at its surface."³¹ Seduction is opposed to that which produces notions of depth, truth, and reality, which Baudrillard categorizes as "production." Production is, according to Baudrillard, the sole focus of the first volume of Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, which details the way in which sexuality is constructed as an essential and real phenomenon through discourse. Even though Foucault "fashions sex into a discursive configuration," discourse's "operations, strategies, and schemes [...] are real: the hysterical woman, the perverse adult, the masturbating child [...] these real, historical devices [...] all exist," or so Foucault, according to Baudrillard, would hold;³² "Foucault sees only the production of sex as discourse."³³ Foucault, in a late essay, acknowledges his preoccupation with deconstructing that which appears as real, although he certainly does not see cause for criticism: "this has always been my problem: the effects of power and the production of 'truth' [...] my problem is the politics of truth."³⁴ In contrast to production, seduction means "to die as reality and reconstitute oneself as illusion," and Baudrillard views the "*seduction of the order of things*"—a statement that snidely alludes to Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1970)—as a line of inquiry that is more valuable than the investigation of that which is constructed as real.³⁵

²⁸ Jameson, "Cultural Logic," 7–8.

²⁹ Ibid., 8.

³⁰ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 63.

³¹ Ibid., 63, 54.

³² Baudrillard, "Forget Foucault," 15.

³³ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 47.

³⁴ Michel Foucault, "Power and Sex," in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Routledge, 1988), 118.

³⁵ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 69, 143.

Although critical of Foucault's narrow focus on production, Baudrillard never suggests that production no longer exists at all, only that it has a competing system of signification in seduction. The production of sex, Baudrillard states, has "started to fade away radically, giving way to other simulacra," by which he means the simulacra of seduction, a "new spiral of sexual stimulation in which sex finds a second existence and takes on the fascination of a lost frame of reference."³⁶ Production is not rendered void by seduction but is simply "pushed aside," as it were, by this competing framework. Yet at other times, Baudrillard suggests that it is production rather than seduction that prevails in contemporary society, at least in relation to sexuality; he states that "more and more, all seduction, all manner of seduction [...] disappears behind the *naturalized* sexual imperative calling for the immediate realization of a desire," that is, the production of sexuality as a natural, real, and involuntary phenomenon.³⁷ He also states that "our center of gravity has been displaced towards a libidinal economy concerned with only the naturalization of desire" and that "ordinarily we live within the realm of the Law," the law being, as will become clear, a central element of production.³⁸

Despite Baudrillard's criticism of Foucault's deconstruction of the real, his contention that art "is about inventing another scene; inventing something other than reality [...]" for art, reality is nothing," is an elaboration of Foucault's analysis of Magritte's artwork.³⁹ For Foucault, Magritte's work transgresses one of the key principles that have governed Western painting between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries: the "equivalence between the fact of resemblance and the affirmation of a representative bond," that is, the notion that a figure resembling something is meant to represent that thing as it exists in reality or outside the sphere of the artwork.⁴⁰ Magritte's work, according to Foucault, retains resemblance but rejects the representative bond, constituting an "art of the 'same,' liberated from the 'as if.'"⁴¹ Foucault states that this is "farthest from *trompe-l'œil*," but it is essential to note that Foucault conceives of the *trompe l'œil* differently to Baudrillard: the latter contends that the *trompe l'œil*, in foregrounding its artifice, never actually "tricks" the viewer into thinking it is real, but Foucault, in contrast, sees that the *trompe l'œil* "seeks to support the weightiest burden of affirmation by the ruse of a convincing resemblance," successfully feigning depth and perspective. Thus Foucault, in distinguishing his aesthetic analysis from the *trompe l'œil*, and Baudrillard, in making the *trompe l'œil* central to his aesthetic framework, arrive at the same position, both describing artwork that displays only a superficial resemblance to that which is framed as real and does not seek to represent it. To further develop this position, Foucault introduces the notion of similitude, which is different from resemblance. The latter "has a 'model,' an original element that orders and hierarchizes the increasingly less faithful copies that can be struck from it"—the reality

³⁶ Baudrillard, "Forget Foucault," 13, 14.

³⁷ Ibid., 24.

³⁸ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 131.

³⁹ Jean Baudrillard, "Too Much Is Too Much (2001)," in *The Conspiracy of Art: Manifestos, Interviews, Essays*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Ames Hodges (New York: Semiotext(e), 2005), 77.

⁴⁰ Foucault, *Pipe*, 34.

⁴¹ Ibid., 43.

that the artwork represents—while similitude has no such model: “the similar develops in series that have neither beginning nor end, that can be followed in one direction as easily as in another, that obeys no hierarchy, but propagate themselves from small differences among small differences.”⁴² Because such artwork has no commitment to an outside reality but operates purely on the level of surface, its appearances may be reversed. Using Magritte’s *Représentation* (1962) and *Les Deux mystères* as examples, Foucault states that “resemblance serves representation, which rules over it; similitude serves repetition, which ranges across it. Resemblance predicates itself upon a model it must return to and reveal; similitude circulates the simulacrum as an indefinite and reversible relation of the similar to the similar.”⁴³ Importantly, however, while Foucault’s notion of similitude denies the existence of a model of reality, suggesting all phenomena to be copies and thus destroying the notion of a real original, Baudrillard’s seduction is a framework defined against that of production; seduction is different from, but does not destroy, that which is constructed as real.

Gendered artifice

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler is, like Baudrillard, working against the “*metaphysics of substance*.”⁴⁴ Just as Baudrillard suggests that, in seduction, the feminine is shown to be constituted through “signs of femininity,” Butler contends that, in relation to gender, there is no “stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow,” but rather that the notion of an inner essence of gender is constructed through appearances, bodily rituals, “a *stylized repetition of acts*,” surface aesthetics that constitute performativity.⁴⁵ Performativity is naturalized so that it appears as an expression of an inner essence when, in fact, gender identities are “*fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.”⁴⁶ When performativity coheres with heterosexual norms and aligns with the “natural” relationship posited between sex, gender performance, and desire for the opposite gender, it “conceals itself.”⁴⁷ From a Baudrillardian perspective, Butler’s inquiry is, like Foucault’s, occupied with production, the construction of the essential and the real; Butler suggests that artifice and aesthetics constitute what is considered as a real gender identity, thereby dissolving distinctions between artifice and reality, the aesthetic and the unaesthetic. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler emphasizes that performativity means neither “free play nor theatrical self-presentation; nor can it be simply equated with performance,” stressing that it is sustained by normative constraints.⁴⁸ However, when the appearance of the natural is disrupted, when there is a “failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic

⁴² Ibid., 44.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 28.

⁴⁵ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 15; Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 191.

⁴⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 185.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 198.

⁴⁸ Butler, *Bodies*, 95.

repetition" in gender's performance, performativity is exposed as such in all its contingency.⁴⁹

The issue of drag brings into focus the key tension between the thought of Butler and Baudrillard: to illustrate how seduction encompasses gender identity, Baudrillard cites Barcelonan drag queens who don various signs of femininity, such as makeup and dresses, alongside facial and chest hair, the dissonance in signification revealing that there is no intention to appear as a "real" woman and suggesting that femininity is "naught but the signs with which men rig it up."⁵⁰ Even when makeup is worn by women, the emphasis makeup gives to the "signs of femininity" serves as a "surface hypersimulation" and effectively "puts an end to every insoluble biology or metaphysics of the sexes."⁵¹ Like Baudrillard, Butler argues that one of the practices that expose the role of aesthetics in constituting gender is drag: "*in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.*"⁵² Yet, while Butler argues that this explicitly artificial form of gender presentation exposes the role of aesthetics and artifice in constituting supposedly natural gender identities, Baudrillard implies that there is a conceptual division between what is constructed as artificial and what is constructed as real, entirely confining his discussion of gender's artificiality to the sphere of seduction.

The law

The realm that seduction opposes, that of production, is governed by the law, which is constructed as objective, essential, and true.⁵³ The law "claims to be the discursive sign of a legal instance and hidden truth" and is thus compatible with notions of liberation, latency, and manifestation, repression and prohibition, inviting "interpretation and decipherment" (132). Because it claims a universal and natural status, the law ensnares: it can only be followed or transgressed, and even transgression still acknowledges its sovereignty. The antithesis of the law is not transgression but the rule, which governs the sphere of seduction and organizes its rituals and games (131). The rule and the law are incomparable: "signs do not have the same status in the one as in the other" (132). In the law, signs are presented as necessary and irreversible, attached to an essential truth, dictating a "potentially universal system of meaning and value" (132, 134). In contrast, in the rule, which claims only "a limited and restricted system," signs are presented as arbitrary and conventional and thus are impossible to transgress (134). One merely chooses to agree upon the rule's conventions and meet its obligations or one leaves the game, however "unsportsmanlike" it may be to do so: "with the rule [...]"

⁴⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 141.

⁵⁰ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 14.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 187.

⁵³ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 125.

either you play or you don't play."⁵⁴ Just as the rule forbids transgression, so too does it render impossible notions of repression or a "hidden truth"; since there is no "deeper order (whether conscious or unconscious)," there is nothing to decipher.⁵⁵ The arbitrary and agreed-upon rules organize ritual, a key component of seduction, an "ostentatious ceremony for mastering signs"; through its dizzying generation and circulation of signs, its "games, stakes and challenges," ritual destroys any claims to truth, depth, and reality in whatever phenomena it encompasses, including "language, sex and affect."⁵⁶ Incorporated into ritual, the body assumes an "aesthetic, decorative character," becoming a means of signification but not of resemblance, representation, or revelation.⁵⁷

Although Baudrillard states that "games do not obey the dialectic of free will," as this concept is a product of "the sphere of the real and the law," and that players are bound by the ritual's obligations, conscious choice is exercised in deciding whether to enter the game, in choosing the rule over the law.⁵⁸ To demonstrate how choice pertains to the ritual performances of seduction is to highlight the difference between Baudrillard's and Butler's aesthetics: while Baudrillard states that one may choose seduction over production, Butler never explicitly suggests that one can choose to discard naturalized gender presentations for those that are overtly artificial, and asserts that even as one engages in practices of drag, one is "implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes."⁵⁹ Butler might concede that one may perform choice but states that choice does not underscore performativity, arguing that "the 'performative' dimension of construction is precisely the forced reiteration of norms [...] constraint calls to be rethought as the very condition of performativity."⁶⁰ Butler does specify that the performance of gender is "not [...] fully determining": not because the subject can choose against "the embodying of norms," but because he or she "never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate."⁶¹ Baudrillard's assertion of choice highlights the way in which he, unlike Butler, conceives of the construction of the artificial as being entirely distinct from the construction of the real, in which choice is absent.

For Baudrillard, the law claims not only universality but equality: "in principle everyone is equal before the Law," the phrase "in principle" conveying the same meaning as "ostensibly." In the rule, on the other hand, "the players [...]" are instituted in a duel and agonistic relation."⁶² Baudrillard's use of the term "duel" is a pun on the notions both of duality and combat, as *Seduction's* translator notes (42n), and thus the rule is characterized by a state of tension and challenge that binds two or more people, so that "the players are *tied* to each other" (136). However, because the law claims universality

⁵⁴ Jean Baudrillard, "Forget Baudrillard: An Interview with Sylvère Lotringer," in *Forget Foucault* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1987), 92.

⁵⁵ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 132, 53, 132.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 139.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 90–2.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 133.

⁵⁹ Butler, *Bodies*, 125.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 94–5.

⁶¹ Ibid., 231.

⁶² Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 136.

and irreversibility while the rule claims only a limited and arbitrary system, there is actually more equality in the latter than in the former. The rules “exist, that’s all. And they exist only when shared, while the Law floats above scattered individuals”; while the rigid and seemingly necessary law is imposed, the rules must be agreed-upon by the participants (136). Furthermore, while one must believe in the law, one is obliged only to observe the rule, and not to believe or disbelieve it; “we do not have to internalize the rules; we owe the rules only a token fidelity” (133, 137). Because the duel and agonistic relation that binds the players of the game never compromises their reciprocity, despite the law’s claims to equality, “we are more equal within ceremonials than before the Law [...] we [...] have more freedom in games than anywhere else” (136, 137). The rule not only permits an equality that the law forbids, but abolishes the law’s tyranny: “with the rule we are free of the Law [...] the terrorism of meaning can only be dissipated by arbitrary signs” (137). The notion that one can be entirely free of the law by adhering to the rule suggests that the two realms can exist simultaneously but separately. Baudrillard not only establishes an unbridgeable divide between the rule and the law, but confines aesthetics to the former, conflating art with artifice. He does not allow for the possibility that there may be an aesthetic element to production, that art may be implicated in the construction of the real and that the law may be also ritualistic. For Baudrillard, production and the law are inherently unaesthetic and so art is not everywhere, as he has otherwise claimed. This implication does not quite equate to what Baudrillard has distinguished as dissimulation, which “leaves the reality principle intact,” for he never speaks of reality *per se*, only the discourses that constitute it within the realm of production.⁶³ Thus, seduction may not leave the reality principle intact, but it does leave intact a form of signification that constructs the real, which is entirely different from that which constructs artifice.

Power

In addition to desire and the body, one of the key phenomena produced within the law is power, constructed as an essential and irreducible substance, which partakes “of all the illusions of production, and of the real; it wants to be real”; power is thus “that figure of anti-seduction *par excellence*.”⁶⁴ This notion of power is, according to Baudrillard, reinforced by Foucault in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. Baudrillard holds that in this text, power is positioned as an “irreversible deployment” that produces sex, and even though Foucault exchanges a monolithic, top-down, and “despotic” conception of power for a “microcellular” framework, in proposing its productive and pervasive force, its “inexplicable presence,” and status in “the objective order of the real,” he constructs, Baudrillard maintains, power’s “truth principle.”⁶⁵ In taking this view, however, Baudrillard would be considered by Butler as exemplifying

⁶³ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 5.

⁶⁴ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 46, 45.

⁶⁵ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 47, 39; Baudrillard, “Forget Foucault,” 12.

“the misreading by which Foucault is criticized for ‘personifying’ power [...] so that] power appears to have displaced the human as the origin of activity.”⁶⁶ Foucault, Butler argues, does no such thing. In *Discipline and Punish*, she contends, Foucault shows that power is not a reified subject that acts upon bodies but that it operates “in the *constitution* of the very materiality of the subject [...] the body is not an independent materiality that is invested by power relations external to it, but it is that for which materialization and investiture are coextensive.”⁶⁷ Nonetheless, Baudrillard suggests that the tone of objectivity pervading Foucault’s writing on power, and his refusal to question power’s “*reality principle*,” obscures the fact that, according to Baudrillard, “power is dead,” usurped by simulation and replaced by the “proliferation of only the *signs* of power,” which, despite not being “real,” have “power effects.”⁶⁸ Baudrillard’s notion of “power effects” confuses what is otherwise a clear distinction made between power that is constructed as real and power that is constructed as artificial. While Foucault may take issue with Baudrillard’s claim that he essentializes power, he does state that “power in the West is what displays itself the most, and thus what hides itself the best [...] the relations of power are perhaps among the best hidden things in the social body.”⁶⁹ Yet it is not power that conceals itself that Baudrillard is concerned with, but power’s explicit signs. For ignoring “*the simulacrum of power itself*” and “reviving the illusion of power”—that is, the illusion that power is real—Baudrillard asserts, “Foucault’s text should be criticized.”⁷⁰

Baudrillard argues that power constructed as real is “soluble” in seduction, which serves as a “black hole absorbing all the substance of the real,” transforming it into a “*mise-en-scène*,” into “a single pure sign.”⁷¹ Power that “seeks to be irreversible, cumulative and immortal” is destroyed in seduction, which acknowledges its own reversibility, its mortality, and its limited capacity, so that power becomes “a reversible configuration” emptied of its truth.⁷² For Baudrillard, this reversibility means there is no difference between those who enforce and those whose who submit to power.⁷³ In power’s production as irreversible and essential, “exploiters and exploited do in fact exist,” but in power’s seduction, there are “no more dominant and dominated, no more victims and executioners [...] no more *separate* positions.”⁷⁴ Furthermore, “if power cannot be ‘exchanged’ in accord with this minor cycle of seduction, challenge and ruse, then it quite simply disappears,” demonstrating that seduction’s absorption of power will always undermine that of production.⁷⁵

Baudrillard’s suggestion that “artificial” power is more powerful than “real” power, since it renders reversible what is otherwise cast as irreversible, implies that a division

⁶⁶ Butler, *Bodies*, 9.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 34.

⁶⁸ Baudrillard, “Forget Foucault,” 11; Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 48; Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 42, 45.

⁶⁹ Foucault, “Power and Sex,” 118.

⁷⁰ Baudrillard, “Forget Foucault,” 40; Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 49.

⁷¹ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 17; Baudrillard, “Forget Foucault,” 51.

⁷² Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 45.

⁷³ Baudrillard, “Forget Foucault,” 41–2.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 44; Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 45.

⁷⁵ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 45, 47.

between the seduction and production of power is maintained, despite Baudrillard's notion of "power effects." Furthermore, Baudrillard's position on power elucidates two sets of equivalences that underpin his aesthetic theory: the real is equated with depth, secrecy, and compulsion, and the artificial with surface, explicitness, and choice.

Perversion

Power, then, is particularly pertinent in demonstrating the relationship between seduction and production, and so is sexual perversion. For Baudrillard, seduction is a better framework through which to conceptualize perversion than psychoanalysis or theories of the unconscious, which belong to the law.⁷⁶ Perversion's affinity with seduction lies in its reliance upon rules and rituals: both perversion and seduction present a "challenge to the natural order," neither following nor transgressing the law but completely evading it through adherence to rules (126). Perversion's perverseness lies not only in its rejection of reproductive goals but in its adherence to the "ritualized, ceremonial form," which Baudrillard sees as exemplified in the rites and protocols that permeate Sade's novels (125). "Perversion is theatrical," and its theatricality renders the rules explicit (128, 127). Baudrillard suggests that seduction may be classified as inherently perverse because it replaces any "*natural law*" attached to sex with "the *arbitrary* rule of a game" (124). Its rites and rituals viciously destroy that which claims to be real, rendering "the theater of ritual [...] also a theater of cruelty. Games rediscover something of this cruelty" (148). Baudrillard's statement that perversion belongs to the realm of "play, not sensual pleasure" means the pleasure born of perversion is not the same as that which is derived from "natural" sex, but a ceremonial form, "a burning concern with signs rather than an exchange of desires. With the pervert, all the intensity of sex is displaced onto the signs and their sequence" (125).

Pleasure

For Baudrillard, the artifice, rituals, and rules of seduction may demolish "inner desire" but seduction is "devoted to pleasure," "an ecstatic form."⁷⁷ Seduction's "aesthetics of irony" transpose "vulgar, physical eroticism into a passion, and strike of wit"; sexual pleasure is transformed from "a *naïve* to a *conscious passion*."⁷⁸ "Conscious passion" is derived from various characteristics of seduction: a "minimum continuum of pleasure" is taken in seduction's "minimal reversibility"; reversibility "constitutes pure gratification (*jouissance*)."⁷⁹ There is "pleasure in playing" and the "esthetic pleasure" produced by "the rules of the game," the "passion for rules, a giddiness born of rules, and a force that

⁷⁶ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 125.

⁷⁷ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 84; Baudrillard, "Forget Baudrillard," 86.

⁷⁸ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 114–5.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 47; Baudrillard, "Forget Foucault," 45.

comes from ceremony, and not desire.”⁸⁰ Rituals and rules produce pleasure through the possibilities they open up: since “the game [...] is based on the hypothesis that everything can be put into play,” the “affects, scenes or signifiers” banished by theories of natural desire and the unconscious can be incorporated into the game (35). While natural sex “has a quick, banal end: the orgasm, the immediate form of desire’s realization” (22), seduction allows pleasure to flourish and develop through its endless challenges and its “uninterrupted ritual exchange” (22). It is also pleasurable to break from notions of reality: the pleasure offered by the *trompe l’œil* is “radical; for it comes from a radical surprise borne of appearances, from a life prior to the mode of production of the real world” (64). The pleasure of seduction is characterized by Baudrillard as a “crystalline passion without equal”; by evoking the “exquisite passion” that Walter Pater, in 1873, likened to a “hard, gemlike flame,” this statement implies that the element of artifice that colored Pater’s notion of aesthetic pleasure is as important to Baudrillard’s.⁸¹

Because the pleasure of seduction is not derived from an inner psychological desire but from its games, rituals, reversibility, and artifice, it is not particular to specific individuals but may be obtained by anyone who engages with the seductive sphere, a notion implied in a late essay on Artaud in which Baudrillard comments that “actors create affects, but they don’t belong to them,” opposing “the modern psychology of the actor.”⁸² This concept is explicitly suggested by Jameson in his notion that postmodern culture is marked by “free-floating and impersonal” affect.⁸³ To demonstrate how this differs from previous paradigms, Jameson cites Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*, which typifies modernism’s emphasis on negative affects such as alienation, anxiety, and isolation, as well as a hermeneutic ontology of the subject, in which emotion is “projected out and externalized, as gesture or cry, as desperate communication and the outward dramatization of inward feeling.”⁸⁴ Because postmodernism also renders depthlessness a “disposition of the subject,” modernist forms of affect are replaced by free-floating “intensities” that tend to be euphoric rather than negative.⁸⁵

Seduction, we have seen, repudiates notions of depth, reality, and natural essence to champion the value of appearances for their own sake. Baudrillard defines the sphere of seduction and the rule—that which is constructed as artificial—against the sphere of production and the law, that which is constructed as real. Thus, it is somewhat contradictory for Baudrillard to suggest that distinctions between depth and surface, reality and appearance, dissolve as surface and appearance come to constitute the only form of depth and authenticity, destroying the inviolability of these terms: “art is everywhere, since artifice is at the very heart of reality.”⁸⁶ The rituals, games, and rules of

⁸⁰ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 147; Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 150; Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 132.

⁸¹ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 148; Pater, *Renaissance*, 198.

⁸² Jean Baudrillard, “Forget Artaud (1996),” in *The Conspiracy of Art: Manifestos, Interviews, Essays*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Ames Hodges (New York: Semiotext(e), 2005), 222.

⁸³ Jameson, “Cultural Logic,” 16.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 11–12.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 9, 11.

⁸⁶ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 151.

seduction, Baudrillard states, constitute a “challenge to the world to exist,” allowing neither “a pre-established state of the world nor bodily anatomy”; seduction “always annuls” the power of production.⁸⁷ When seduction encompasses power, it shows that “the unilateral character of the relation of forces on which the ‘structure’ and ‘reality’ of power and its perpetual movement are supposedly instituted, does not exist.”⁸⁸ Because “simulation threatens the difference between ‘true’ and ‘false,’ between ‘real’ and ‘imaginary,’” while traditional aesthetics maintain the division between representation and reality, instances of simulation and seduction can be considered “neither fable, story or composition, nor theatre, [or] scene,” but serve, rather, as “anti-ceremony or anti-representation,” highlighting and parodying the theatricality of reality.⁸⁹ Baudrillard’s characterization of seduction as “anti-representation” anticipates Foster’s definition of the “anti-aesthetic” as that which deconstructs “the order of representation” and critiques ideologies such as the distinction between authenticity and appearance.⁹⁰ In stating that seduction means “no more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept,” that it heralds “the end of the world as will and representation,” Baudrillard cites Schopenhauer’s distinction between surface representation and its essence, and in doing so suggests that his concept of seduction extends Nietzsche’s attack on Schopenhauer’s metaphysical dualism by allowing only “a radical metaphysics of simulation.”⁹¹ Yet because Baudrillard has otherwise drawn a sharp distinction between constructions of artifice and constructions of reality (not, it should be noted, simply between artifice and reality), it is problematic that he also argues that what is known as reality is simply a matter of artifice, an argument that erases the distinction established between these terms. Because he has confined aesthetics solely to the sphere of seduction, framing production as inherently unaesthetic, it is contradictory that he also argues that seduction parodies the theatricality and aesthetic character of reality. Even in arguing that artifice is “at the very heart of power and production,” Baudrillard suggests that seduction and production define each other as separate realms: “it is this emptiness that today gives [power and production] their last glimmer of reality. Without that which reverses, annuls, and seduces them, they would never have had the authority of reality.”⁹² Baudrillard does not entirely replicate Schopenhauerian dualism but nor does he succeed in discarding it.

Foucault is more successful than Baudrillard at destroying the binary opposition between concepts of artifice and reality in his discussion of Magritte’s work, which shows apparent depth and truth to be surface matter. The principle of similitude that Foucault reads in Magritte’s paintings repudiates the notion of a model from which copies are derived, framing all phenomena as copies and representations, denying “along with resemblance, the assertion of reality resemblance conveys.”⁹³ Magritte

⁸⁷ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 91, 15.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁸⁹ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 5; Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 60.

⁹⁰ Hal Foster, “Postmodernism: a Preface,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983), xv.

⁹¹ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 3; Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 104, 91.

⁹² Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 46.

⁹³ Foucault, *Pipe*, 47.

“names his paintings in order to focus attention upon the very act of naming” and, through his “play of words and images,” demonstrates the ways in which reality is constructed through language: “*Ceci n’est pas une pipe* exemplifies the penetration of discourse into the form of things; it reveals discourse’s ambiguous power to deny and to redouble.”⁹⁴ It is, perhaps, the absence of an essential reality that is in question when Foucault declares that “similitude reveals what recognizable objects, familiar silhouettes hide, prevent from being seen, render invisible.”⁹⁵ Foucault and, in a slightly different vein, Butler show that what is cast as reality is simply constituted through representation, that these terms are not oppositional nor mutually exclusive. Baudrillard, however, maintains distinctions between that which is constructed as real and that which is constructed as artificial even though he attempts to dissolve them.

Sadomasochism as anti-aesthetic theater

These postmodern aesthetics, with their continuities and tensions, underscore and elucidate the construction of sadomasochism as an aesthetic performance of power in post-1980 American political essays and fictional works, most of which concern sadomasochism practiced by women. This cultural moment exemplifies an instance of aesthetic sexuality in full bloom, with its repudiation of pathology and psychological depth, its insistent focus on the intensification of pleasure, and its assertion of choice. Yet, as will become clear, this particular construction of aesthetic sadomasochism is wrought by a contradiction that illuminates the quandary posed for aesthetic sexuality within postmodernity.

This analysis is focused upon essays that mount a defense of sadomasochism, predominantly in response to radical feminist criticism: essays from *Coming to Power* by Gayle Rubin, Susan Farr, Barbara Rose, Margaret Hunt, “Juicy Lucy,” and “Sharon”; those from what is touted as the work’s sequel, *The Second Coming: a Leatherdyke Reader* (1996), by Lamar Van Dyke, Rebecca Dawn Kaplan, and Linda Wayne; in addition to works by Califia: “Sadomasochism and Feminism” (1981), the introduction to *Macho Sluts* (1988), and *Speaking Sex to Power: The Politics of Queer Sex* (2002); and two academic works defending the practice by Atara Stein (1999) and Carol Truscott (1991). This archive of material comfortably accommodates two essays by Foucault: “Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity,” based on an interview conducted in 1982 and first published in 1984, and “Sexual Choice, Sexual Act: Foucault and Homosexuality,” first published in 1982. Foucault’s essays cohere in several ways with the American paradigm: Foucault cites Rubin as being influential to his thought on sadomasochism in addition to his personal experiences in the subcultures of San Francisco and New York.⁹⁶ The fictional works addressed here serve primarily as pornography in varying degrees of explicitness, that is, as texts intended to sexually arouse the reader, but they nevertheless engage with

⁹⁴ Ibid., 36, 38, 37.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 46.

⁹⁶ Foucault, “Politics of Identity,” 165, 167.

feminist debates and contribute to the construction of sadomasochism as an aesthetic performance of power. From *Coming to Power*, I discuss stories by A. J. Sagan and Martha Alexander, and from *The Second Coming* I examine work by L. J. Dreamwalker, Minx Kelly, Laura Antoniou, and Mistress J. R. I also use a range of fictional works from Califia's *Macho Sluts* and a story by Carol Queen from Robin Sweeney's and Califia's edited collection *Doing it for Daddy* (1994). Califia's fiction tends to carry an anti-radical feminist tone: from the book *No Mercy* (2000), the title of the story "Mercy" appropriates the title of Andrea Dworkin's 1990 novel. In this story, a character uses the safeword "Griffindalydworkin," a sly nod to radical feminists Griffin, Dworkin, and Mary Daly.⁹⁷ In "Too Much is Almost Enough," a protracted scene of lesbian sadomasochism concludes ironically and reflexively with the submissive character thinking "thank God tomorrow was Sunday. But the last thing she felt like doing was grading 32 papers on 'Collusion and Resistance: Women's Oppression in the 20th Century.'"⁹⁸ Of course, sadomasochism-as-performance is not the only notion present in these texts—they also address, for example, ideas of "authentic" sadomasochists, "true" identities, and sadomasochism-as-therapy—but it does form a strong narrative amongst others, constituting an important notion within subcultural self-identifications.

Aesthetic/anti-aesthetic

Several of the pro-sadomasochism writers imply that the tendency of radical feminists to associate this practice with patriarchal oppression results from an inappropriately literal reading, one that positions sadomasochistic practice as displaying "the gravity of real things."⁹⁹ Those who contend that "lesbian S/M recapitulates and reinforces the oppressive structures of the society" are, Hunt insists, forming "simplistic or over-literal correspondences" to what might be deemed a "familiar reality."¹⁰⁰ As Hart notes, the presumption of resemblance and direct reference is implicit in radical feminist condemnation: "take your pick: sadomasochism looks like and therefore is like—Slavery, the Holocaust, Heterosexist Patriarchy, the Jonestown Massacre," notions that imply that "lesbian sadomasochism is a copy, an iconic reproduction of an oppressive model."¹⁰¹ Literality is also cited by Wayne as the key error of anti-sadomasochism campaigners: "the *mere visual signification* of S/M is accepted as proof of its depravity [...] this critique assumes that wearing such clothes and symbols indicates or proves that S/M community's alignment with heteropatriarchal neoimperialist culture."¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Pat Califia, "Mercy," in *No Mercy* (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2000), 12; a safeword is a phrase used, often by the submissive participant, to halt proceedings.

⁹⁸ Califia, "Too Much," 73.

⁹⁹ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 61.

¹⁰⁰ Margaret Hunt, "Report on a Conference on Feminism, Sexuality and Power: The Elect Clash with the Perverse," in *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, ed. Samois (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987), 85–6; Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 60.

¹⁰¹ Hart, *Between the Body*, 84, 85.

¹⁰² Linda Wayne, "S/M Symbols, Fascist Icons, and Systems of Empowerment," in *The Second Coming: A Leatherdyke Reader*, eds. Pat Califia and Robin Sweeney (Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 1996), 242.

Wayne opposes the use of “proximity and resemblance” as the basis for equating a leather cap or pair of boots with “Nazism, facism, or patriarchal aggression.”¹⁰³ Pro-sadomasochist writers critique the radical feminist conception of sadomasochism similarly to the way in which one might be critiqued for using a traditional aesthetic framework, whereby the image “is the reflection of a basic reality,” to interpret an instance of postmodern seduction.¹⁰⁴

In addition to refuting the representative bond interpreted in the resemblance between sadomasochist power and social power, pro-sadomasochists contest radical feminist opposition by undermining the claim that the practice results from an internalization of social power structures, suggesting that in postmodern constructions of sadomasochism, as in postmodern aesthetics, there is no psychopathology or subjective depth, nor any “deeper order” of the unconscious.¹⁰⁵ This is declared explicitly by Foucault: “I don’t think that this movement of sexual practices has anything to do with the disclosure or the uncovering of S&M tendencies deep within our unconscious [...] the idea that S&M is related to a deep violence, that S&M is a way of liberating this violence, this aggression, is stupid.”¹⁰⁶ In this defense, it is not only an association with social violence that is rejected, but a violence belonging to a “deeper order,” an inner urge that seeks an outer manifestation. The “deeper order” belonging specifically to psychology is rejected outright by others: Rubin, who finds “the idea that [she has] been brainwashed infuriating and ludicrous,” insists that “psychology is the last resort of those who refuse to acknowledge that sexual dissidents are as conscious and free as any other group of sexual actors” (ignoring, in this statement, the possibility that psychology also pertains to the act of conscious decision-making).¹⁰⁷ Kaplan asserts that sadomasochists are not “brain-washed” by “heteropatriarchal influence” and indeed rejects the terms “sadism” and “masochism,” because of their association with “sexist psychologists” and their pathologizing discourses.¹⁰⁸ In promoting a preferable alternative to “sadism,” “masochism,” and “sadomasochism” in the term “*power play*,” Kaplan capitalizes upon the connotations of artifice and the rejection of psychic depth implied in the concept of “play,” a phrase to which we will return.¹⁰⁹

Sadomasochistic rule/social law

Sadomasochistic power and social power, like Baudrillard’s notions of the rule and the law, are posited by pro-sadomasochist writers as absolutely incomparable. Social power

¹⁰³ Ibid., 248.

¹⁰⁴ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 11.

¹⁰⁵ Jameson, “Cultural Logic,” 15; Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 53.

¹⁰⁶ Foucault, “Politics of Identity,” 165.

¹⁰⁷ Rubin, “Leather Menace,” 223; Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *The Lesbian & Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1984), 306.

¹⁰⁸ Rebecca Dawn Kaplan, “Sex, Lies, and Heteropatriarchy: The S/M Debates at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival,” in *The Second Coming: A Leatherdyke Reader*, eds. Pat Califia and Robin Sweeney (Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 1996), 126.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 128.

structures such as patriarchy appear to be compulsory, universal, and natural, and thus ensnare and constrict, instating “compulsory sexual arrangements, wherein people can be labeled according to race, age, class and gender [...] everybody a guard or a prisoner, with no choice, no safe word, no negotiation” and promoting “indiscriminate and systematic violence where consent is absent.”¹¹⁰ Rubin distinguishes the “social relations between tops and bottoms” from “the social relations between men and women, blacks and whites, straights and queers” on the basis that there is no systematic oppression involved in the former instance.¹¹¹ Sadomasochists, like Baudrillard’s pervers, neither follow nor transgress the law but evade it entirely by entering into the ritualized space of the rule.¹¹² Baudrillard’s game players know the governing rules to be arbitrary, confined to the “limited and restricted system” of seduction, and, similarly, the sadomasochist knows its elected power position to be restricted to the arbitrary sadomasochistic game, knows that “a role adopted during a scene is not appropriate during other interactions.”¹¹³ That the power relations of sadomasochism correspond with the arbitrary rule is also suggested in Wayne’s discussion of sadomasochistic symbolism. Wayne argues that this symbolism “takes on a specific and active function within the limits of group encoding [...] only through group agreement,” in contrast to the “visually self-evident” sign systems that she says are used by various social groups to construct hierarchies based on a “naturalized identity position” that is posited as normal in opposition to the “‘other’ abnormal or perverse identities of subordinate groups.” This statement emphasizes the law’s investment in appearing universal, objective, and necessary.¹¹⁴ Wayne establishes these distinctions to argue, like Baudrillard, that signs signify in entirely different ways within sadomasochism—which is comparable to the rule—and the social realm, which operates according to the law.¹¹⁵

For sadomasochistic roles and rituals to be valid, they need to be agreed upon by all parties involved, a notion implicit in the emphasis on consent; as Califia notes, “the top’s pleasure is dependent on the bottom’s willingness to play. This gives most sadists a mild-to-severe case of performance anxiety.”¹¹⁶ The distinction forged between the agreed-upon, voluntary rule, and the compulsory, imposed law is echoed in Juicy Lucy’s distinction between sadomasochistic or “sexual” power, and social or “non-sexual” power: “in a sexual context sadist & masochist are roles that define erotic poles of power & have meanings of passion trust & intensity that flow from a fully consensual situation. In a non-sexual context sadist & masochist are roles in power-over situations involving pain & cruelty where the consensual agreement to these roles is

¹¹⁰ Pat Califia, “Introduction,” in *Macho Sluts* (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 1988), 25–6; Susan Farr, “The Art of Discipline: Creating Erotic Dramas of Play and Power,” in *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, ed. Samois (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987), 183.

¹¹¹ Rubin, “Leather Menace,” 224; “top” and “bottom” offer alternative terms to “sadist” and “masochist,” or “dominant” and “submissive.”

¹¹² Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 125.

¹¹³ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 134; Pat Califia, “Feminism and Sadomasochism,” in *Feminism and Sexuality: A Reader*, eds. Sue Scott and Stevi Jackson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 232.

¹¹⁴ Wayne, “Symbols,” 245, 248, 247.

¹¹⁵ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 132.

¹¹⁶ Califia, “Feminism,” 232.

unacknowledged or absent.”¹¹⁷ Because sadomasochistic power relations are negotiated between all parties involved, it is suggested that there can be no coercion nor perceived necessity, traits belonging solely to social power dynamics, to the law: “force is not a part of the province of sadism and masochism [...] Coercion is an accepted part of daily life for most people.”¹¹⁸ These accounts clearly assert a sharp division between the aesthetic realm of performance and the unaesthetic realm of reality, a naïve echo of Baudrillard’s division between that which is constructed as artificial in seduction and that which is constructed as authentic in production. In making an absolute demarcation between sadomasochistic power and social power, these writers ignore the possibility that within the performance of sadomasochism, the eroticism generated by particular gestures or symbols of power—such as the leather cap or boots cited by Wayne—is tied to the use of such symbols within the non-consensual and unaesthetic “reality” or social law. Such symbols may acquire new meaning within the self-conscious and consensual theatre of sadomasochism but they cannot be dissociated from what is posited as the oppressive social realm as cleanly as these arguments propose. A more plausible suggestion might be found in McClintock’s hypothesis that “as a theater of conversion, S/M reverses and transforms the social meanings it borrows,” which, at least, acknowledges some form of continuity between sadomasochistic and social forms of power.¹¹⁹

Performed power/real power

Operating within the seductive sphere of the rule, then, sadomasochism is framed as play, performance, and ritual, “an ostentatious ceremony for mastering signs.”¹²⁰ Like Baudrillard’s *trompe l’œil*, the practice “does not seek to confuse itself with the real,” but, constructed through “play and artifice, it presents itself as a simulacrum.”¹²¹ This is suggested by those who label the practice a game or as play. Kaplan’s notion of sadomasochism as “power play” is echoed by Van Dyke’s contention that “Leatherdykes [...] play with power [...] we have fun with power,” and Stein’s assertion that “the partners in an s/m scene consciously play with power.”¹²² The difference between sadomasochistic power and social power is said to correspond with the difference

¹¹⁷ Juicy Lucy, “If I Ask You to Tie Me up, Will You Still Want to Love Me?” in *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, ed. Samois (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987), 30.

¹¹⁸ Califa, “Introduction,” 25–6.

¹¹⁹ Anne McClintock, “Imperial Leather: Race, Cross-Dressing and the Cult of Domesticity,” in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995), 641.

¹²⁰ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 90.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹²² Kaplan, “Hetropatriarchy,” 128; Lamar Van Dyke, “Unity in the Community,” in *The Second Coming: A Leatherdyke Reader*, eds. Pat Califa and Robin Sweeney (Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 1996), 117; Atara Stein, “‘Without Contraries Is No Progression’: S/M, Bi-nary Thinking, and the Lesbian Purity Test,” in *Lesbian Sex Scandals: Sexual Practices, Identities, and Politics*, ed. Dawn Atkins (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1999), 51.

“between play and reality” as “playing Monopoly is not the same thing as actually trying to bankrupt everyone and take over the world.”¹²³ The “pure play” of sadomasochism, as Truscott describes it, relies upon the “the pure play of appearances” that define seduction.¹²⁴ The notion of play, in these discourses, is linked with the idea of theatricality; perversion is theatrical for Baudrillard as for many of its subcultural advocates. For Califia, “the S/M subculture is a theater in which sexual dramas can be acted out and appreciated,” and for Farr, it is “pure theater” and “what is being dramatized is the exercise of power”; a distinction between play and reality is implicit in Farr’s statement that “what is going on is a drama where the two principals [...] act at being master and slave, play at being fearsome and fearful.”¹²⁵

Califia’s story “The Calyx of Isis” details the group domination of a slave called Roxanne, an exercise devised to enable Roxanne to prove her commitment to her lover Alex, who wishes to master the performance of power so as to transform Roxanne into “a living work of art.”¹²⁶ The aesthetic qualities of this performance art illuminate its difference from social power: Califia spurns “genuine violence” because it is crude, lacking in interest, a case of “simple brutality,” whereas in sadomasochism, by contrast, submission “acquires a complex aesthetic, a fine-tuned stomach-shivering delight.”¹²⁷ In a similar vein, Stein asserts that sadomasochistic practice is “very deliberate, controlled, and stylized, often involving extensive preparation, staging, and negotiation. Many s/m scenes depend heavily on props, costumes, music, candles, and other trappings to create a ritual space or circle, clearly demarcated from the outside world.”¹²⁸ These ritual aesthetics demonstrate the “weightlessness” of sadomasochistic power dynamics, its “pure appearances” that have no bearing outside its boundaries: “the collar and cuffs worn by the bottom do not negate her power or oppress her in the outside world; rather, they serve symbolically to demarcate her role in the scene.” As in Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes*, there are no psychological “conditions of production” to be analyzed, nor any wider lived context from which to interpret the scene, which exists only for its own image and displays a form of power that shines “in the vacancy of all its artificial light.”¹²⁹

The pro-sadomasochist assertions and narratives considered here imply that, in relation to social power, sadomasochistic power constitutes an “art of the ‘same,’ liberated from the ‘as if,’” resembling but not representing social power dynamics.¹³⁰ Yet such accounts never entirely achieve the status of Foucault’s notion of similitude: while similitude denies the existence of a real model from which copies are derived, the writers

¹²³ Kaplan, “Hetropatriarchy,” 126.

¹²⁴ Carol Truscott, “S/M: Some Questions and a Few Answers,” in *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, ed. Mark Thompson (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1991), 21; Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 8.

¹²⁵ Califia, “Feminism,” 232; Farr, “Discipline,” 187.

¹²⁶ Pat Califia, “The Calyx of Isis,” in *Macho Sluts* (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 1988), 97.

¹²⁷ Patrick Califia, *Speaking Sex to Power: The Politics of Queer Sex* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2002), 376–7.

¹²⁸ Stein, “Progression,” 51.

¹²⁹ Baudrillard, “Aesthetic Illusion,” 125.

¹³⁰ Foucault, *Pipe*, 43.

considered here posit a system of power that belongs to a social reality, albeit one that is seen as entirely divorced from the performance of power. Discernable in these assertions, however, is Baudrillard's refusal to acknowledge the capacity for the aesthetic to exist outside the bounds of the rule; these accounts ignore the fact that social power structures constructed as real and necessary—monarchy and parliamentary democracy, for example—are also fashioned through ritual and theatricality, and may also involve “imaginative creation.” As in Baudrillard's account, the overlaps between the theatrical and the social law are overlooked. Like Baudrillard, the writers considered here confine the aesthetic to the realm of artifice, reductively suggesting that it is only in an explicitly performed capacity that one may take pleasure or “have fun” with power.

A ritual of choice

Just as one may consciously choose whether or not to engage in a performance, game, or ritual, so too, it is proposed, may one consciously choose to engage in sadomasochism, to meet the obligations of the game's rules, and this choice may be made by potentially anyone: “power play is not something obscure that only a few weirdos can enjoy.”¹³¹ The basis of choice is reiterated at length throughout the pro-sadomasochism essays: “we choose to do S/M”; “S/M is something which is freely chosen by people fully in command of their faculties”; “the practice of bdsm [...] can be a deliberate and consciously chosen form of play, not a recreation of heterosexual values.”¹³² Just as one may choose to engage in sadomasochistic activity, so too may one “set one's own limits” and choose to “leave the game,” reinforcing the distinction between sadomasochism and what is considered as reality: “the other clue [that sadomasochism is play] is that the whole episode can be called off with a word [...] some code word [...] by which the curtain can be dropped on the whole show should either party want to go home.”¹³³ It is apparent, then, that postmodern constructions of sadomasochism encompass precisely the “unconstrained voluntarism [...] ‘the freedom of a subject to form her/his sexuality as s/he pleases’” that Butler emphatically excludes from her notion of performativity but which Baudrillard embraces.¹³⁴ As Butler observes, “a construction is [...] not the same as an artifice,” but in this particular cultural moment, sadomasochism is constructed precisely upon notions of artifice, “theatrical self-presentation,” and performance, highlighting an important tension in postmodern aesthetics: in postmodernism, as Baudrillard, Butler, and Foucault have illustrated, art is everywhere, constituting the heart of reality and thus dissolving distinctions between the aesthetic and the unaesthetic, representation and reality.¹³⁵ But as the surveyed defenses of sadomasochism have highlighted, these binary oppositions endure into the postmodern moment, in which performativity means precisely chosen artifice as well as the

¹³¹ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 133; Kaplan, “Hetropatriarchy,” 127.

¹³² Califa, “Introduction,” 26; Hunt, “Conference,” 87; Stein, “Progression,” 53.

¹³³ Califa, “Introduction,” 25; Farr, “Discipline,” 187.

¹³⁴ Butler, *Bodies*, 94.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 94, 95.

constitution of the real. Indeed, distinctions between the aesthetic and the unaesthetic have been so rigorously maintained that overlaps and connections between what is posited as performed power and real power have been circumscribed. The distinction that Baudrillard makes between what is constructed as artificial and what is constructed as real—a distinction that contradicts his claim that aesthetics permeate all of reality—translates in the pro-sadomasochism arguments considered here as a straightforward distinction between the artificial and the real, these terms deployed without scare quotes, as it were.

Power's seductive reversibility

When power is absorbed into seduction, Baudrillard argues, it is transformed from its rigid and universal construction in the law to “a reversible configuration” in the rule. In defenses of sadomasochism, the reversibility or flexibility of sadomasochistic power relations is conveyed through the notion of power as energy, a concept that suggests the possibility of power flowing in any direction: “power is a form of energy, structured energy,” writes Stein, a notion reiterated by Farr: “power is energy.”¹³⁶ For Juicy Lucy, it is the reversibility of power that distinguishes its sadomasochistic form from rigid, inflexible, and imposed social power: “it is an oversimplification to talk about the erotic exchange as though it only flowed one way [...] in sexual S/M the exchange is mutual, with both sides giving & receiving erotic intensity.”¹³⁷ In contrast to sadomasochism's exchange, “patriarchy & heterosexuality attempt to freeze power.”¹³⁸ Similarly to Juicy Lucy, Foucault distinguishes sadomasochistic power from social power on the basis of the reversibility of the former, echoing Baudrillard's distinction between power as it is constructed in the rule and in the law: in society, “what characterizes power is the fact that it is a strategic relation which has been stabilized through institutions [...] the mobility in power relations is limited, and there are strongholds that are very, very difficult to suppress because they have been institutionalized and are now very pervasive in courts, codes, and so on. All this means that the strategic relations of people are made very rigid.” In sadomasochism, however, this rigidity is replaced by flexibility and reversibility as power “is always fluid.”¹³⁹

The reversibility of power is also apparent in the notion that one can easily switch dominant and submissive positions. The terminology used to describe these positions is significant in this respect: for Foucault, “there are roles, but everybody knows very well that those roles can be reversed. Sometimes the scene begins with the master and slave, and at the end the slave has become the master. Or, even when the roles are stabilized, you know very well that it is always a game.”¹⁴⁰ Like Foucault, Antoniou prefers to use the term “role” when discussing sadomasochism, asserting that “roles are

¹³⁶ Stein, “Progression,” 51; Farr, “Discipline,” 184.

¹³⁷ Juicy Lucy, “Tie Me Up,” 31.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Foucault, “Politics of Identity,” 169.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

the most common part of S/M play. When we explain S/M behavior to the unknowing, we start by explaining tops and bottoms.”¹⁴¹ In accordance with the trope of performance, the term “role” suggests a position one may choose to enter or leave, as do the spatial metaphors “top” and “bottom,” terms that imply that changing one’s power position is as easy as changing one’s physical location. As Rubin notes, “tops and bottoms are not two discrete populations [...] Most S/M people have done both, and many change with different partners, at different times, or according to situation or whim.”¹⁴² Thus, in sadomasochism, as in seduction, although there are different roles and positions to take, as Baudrillard states, “we see no difference [...] between those who enforce it and those who submit to it: this distinction has become meaningless [...] because power is *in its form reversible*.”¹⁴³ Several writers suggest that the reversibility of sadomasochistic power relations is directly tied to its artificiality, its status as performance: that “the vulnerable submissive of today is the firm and strict dominant of tomorrow” is a “clue to how much of drama and how little of reality is involved” in sadomasochism.¹⁴⁴ Lynch proposes that lesbian sadomasochists can free power positions from rigidity “by staging a theatrical and usually interchangeable play of roles.”¹⁴⁵ Sadomasochism enables this reversibility of power relations precisely because it repudiates reality, permitting a form of freedom denied in the realm of the real, as Califia suggests: “if you don’t like being a top or bottom, you switch your keys. Try doing that with your biological sex or your race or your socioeconomic status.”¹⁴⁶ These accounts suggest, then, that sadomasochism exemplifies the way in which the “Rule frees one from the Law.”¹⁴⁷

Devotion to pleasure

Although it knows no desire, seduction is “devoted to pleasure,” as is sadomasochism.¹⁴⁸ For Foucault, sadomasochism aims to intensify pleasure and may be thus considered a site for the development of an *ars erotica*, “a whole new art of sexual practice.”¹⁴⁹ Foucault finds agreement on the goal of sadomasochism from many other practitioners: “people who are bored with sex, if they only tried something like S/M! [...] I mean S/M *isn’t* boring sex! It’s creative [...] Sex is more fun and better than ever.”¹⁵⁰ Rose chooses to practice sadomasochism because she likes “sex to be as erotic as possible” and Juicy

¹⁴¹ Laura Antoniou, “Electra, on the Rocks,” in *The Second Coming: A Leatherdyke Reader*, eds. Pat Califia and Robin Sweeney (Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 1996), 256.

¹⁴² Rubin, “Leather Menace,” 223–4.

¹⁴³ Baudrillard, “Forget Foucault,” 41–2.

¹⁴⁴ Farr, “Discipline,” 187.

¹⁴⁵ Karen Lynch, “The ‘Heterosexualisation’ of Sadism and Masochism,” *Hecate* 29, no. 1 (2003): 41.

¹⁴⁶ Califia, “Feminism,” 233.

¹⁴⁷ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 137.

¹⁴⁸ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 84.

¹⁴⁹ Foucault, “Sexual Choice,” 151.

¹⁵⁰ Sharon, “Hot and Heavy: Chris Interviews Sharon and Bear,” in *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, ed. Samois (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987), 58.

Lucy states that “the satisfaction of all concerned is a prime goal in S/M.”¹⁵¹ Sadomasochism’s capacity to generate pleasure—pleasure severed from a “deeper order”—displaces the notion of inner desire, which Foucault views as an urgent political task: “for centuries people generally, as well as doctors, psychiatrists, and even liberation movements, have always spoken about desire, and never about pleasure. ‘We have to liberate our desire,’ they say. *No!* we have to create new pleasure”; for Foucault, this impetus is met through the way in which sadomasochism enables “the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure.”¹⁵² Although it is problematic to contend that pleasure and desire belong to entirely different planes of experience—for surely desire and pleasure are involved in the constitution of each other—such a distinction is implicated in sadomasochism’s postmodern incarnation. The main ways in which sadomasochism produces pleasure mark it as clearly belonging to Baudrillard’s realm of seduction: pleasure is generated through sadomasochism’s games and challenges, surface sensations, and the signs of artifice.

As in Baudrillard’s notion of seduction, the sadomasochistic ritual involves the “games, stakes, and challenges” of the rule, which function as sources of pleasure.¹⁵³ The range of erotic games and challenges created by sadomasochistic power dynamics—even in the early courting stages of a sadomasochistic affair—is demonstrated in Califia’s story “Jessie,” which describes an intense one-night stand that crescendos into “long throbbing seconds of liberation and silence and obliteration” for the lucky submissive.¹⁵⁴ At the outset of the evening, Jessie begins to unbutton her soon-to-be-lover’s jeans on a dancefloor, a gesture met with a shriek: “‘apparently, I’m not the one who’s going to change her mind,’ she drawled. I winced. ‘Touché. I concede the point.’ ‘Mmm.’ She wound her fingers in my hair. ‘What else are you willing to concede?’ ‘Whatever you can make me concede.’ ‘You won’t go along peacefully, huh? I have to use force?’ ‘Don’t you want to use force?’ Jessie laughed. ‘Point for you.’”¹⁵⁵ In this passage, the tension and uncertainty that belong to courtship rituals, rites of seduction, are given a sadomasochistic exaggeration, but Foucault argues that a pleasurable exchange of power is intrinsic to courtship in general, whereby one may “surrender to the other” by submitting to their sexual advances. In sadomasochism, Foucault suggests, the “energy and imagination” of these power relations are no longer aimed at attaining sex—which is no longer such a challenge—but are rather “devoted to intensifying the act of sex itself.”¹⁵⁶ He compares sadomasochism to “a chess game in the sense that one can win and the other lose,” both players focused on meeting the challenges posed by the other through anticipation and endurance.¹⁵⁷ Just as Baudrillard sees that the challenges and ritual exchanges of seduction enable a form of pleasure that exceeds the

¹⁵¹ Barbara Rose, “Reasons,” in *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, ed. Samois (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987), 14; Juicy Lucy “Tie Me Up,” 31.

¹⁵² Foucault, “Politics of Identity,” 167, 165.

¹⁵³ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 139.

¹⁵⁴ Pat Califia, “Jessie,” in *Macho Sluts* (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 1988), 59.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁵⁶ Foucault, “Sexual Choice,” 298.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 299.

“quick, banal end” of “natural” sex—that is, orgasm—so too does Foucault see that sadomasochism’s “mixture of rules and openness [...] has the effect of intensifying sexual relations by introducing a perpetual novelty, a perpetual tension and a perpetual uncertainty, which the simple consummation of the act lacks.”¹⁵⁸

In addition to the games and challenges enabled by sadomasochistic power dynamics, pleasure is created through the use of pain in a way that highlights its production through the surface of the skin—and thus sadomasochism’s concern with “the surface of things”—rather than through inner psychological desire.¹⁵⁹ Juicy Lucy declares that pain produces “an intensification of sensation, a heightened stimulation of certain areas & it *feels good*,” anticipating Foucault’s notion that “the idea is also to make use of every part of the body as a sexual instrument” in order to create “very numerous pleasures” that exceed those offered by genital stimulation.¹⁶⁰ Foucault’s position is also prefigured in Califia’s statement that sadomasochism involves “making use of the entire body, every nerve fiber.”¹⁶¹ The pleasure created through the application of intense sensation to the skin is enhanced by the use of the drug “poppers,” or amyl nitrate. Poppers intensify the pleasure of torture and whipping in Sagan’s “Act II, Scene I” and enhance anal penetration and the sense of submission in Califia’s story “The Calyx of Isis,” in which Roxanne has the feeling of “flying, falling, rushing – rushing! [...] penetration was exquisite pleasure. Under the magical assault of the poppers, she felt no need to lift her littlest finger. Since she could not act, she could yield herself totally.”¹⁶² The compatibility of drugs and pleasure is implied in these fictional works and also acknowledged by Foucault, who sees that, like sadomasochism, “*good* drugs [...] can produce very intense pleasure.”¹⁶³ An artificial substance that creates pleasure rather than liberates inner desire, poppers offer “free-floating and impersonal” intensities to any user, enhancing the “joyous intensities” offered through the use of pain and other sensations in the seductive scene of sadomasochism.¹⁶⁴ It must be noted, however, that although sadomasochistic pain and pleasure, in these accounts, do not point to an inward or hidden source or cause, they cannot be classified as purely performed: one can provide a theatrical infliction of or response to pain, but the sensation must be considered “real,” genuinely felt, problematizing a binary division between artifice and authenticity. As this example indicates, art cannot be confined solely to the sphere of artifice, and that which is artificial or not natural is not necessarily “fake.”

The sensations created in sadomasochistic practice are also designated as surface phenomena in constituting an aesthetic formation. The screams elicited by pain, for example, become music. One dominant instructs Roxanne in “The Calyx of Isis”: “give me your pain [...] give it to me out of your open mouth. Sing to me.”¹⁶⁵ The

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 152.

¹⁵⁹ Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 143.

¹⁶⁰ Juicy Lucy, “Tie Me Up,” 35; Foucault, “Sexual Choice,” 152; Foucault, “Politics of Identity,” 165.

¹⁶¹ Califia, “Feminism,” 234.

¹⁶² A. J. Sagan, “Act II, Scene I,” in *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, ed. Samois (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987), 48; Califia, “Calyx,” 132–3.

¹⁶³ Foucault, “Politics of Identity,” 165.

¹⁶⁴ Jameson, “Cultural Logic,” 16, 29.

¹⁶⁵ Califia, “Calyx,” 145.

nineteenth-century floral aesthetic resurfaces here in conjunction with the eighteenth-century valuation of symmetry and uniformity: in Califia's "The Vampire," a mistress "inflicted a dozen times nine crimson and overflowing welts, each bleeding bouquet placed an even distance from its mates."¹⁶⁶ In "The Calyx of Isis," a dominant applies antibiotic cream to the wounds of a whipped submissive while "expressing purely aesthetic appreciation," that is, the Baudrillardian "esthetic pleasure" of the surfaces and ceremonies of seduction.¹⁶⁷

In addition to its source in sadomasochism's games and challenges, surface sensations and aesthetics, pleasure is also derived from the sheer artificiality and theatricality of the practice, its distinction from "real" social power. It is precisely the "play" status of sadomasochism that is pleasurable: "it is this play with power that keeps us interested."¹⁶⁸ The pleasure that "comes from ceremony, and not desire" is demonstrated in the way in which the "roles, dialogue, [and] fetish costumes" that feature in the "drama or ritual" are aimed at "enhancing [...] sexual pleasure."¹⁶⁹ "A passion for rules" is displayed by Anne-Marie in "The Calyx of Isis," with the explanation that "the ritualistic etiquette of S/M; the titles, forms of salutation, provocation, and response [...] were her first love."¹⁷⁰ Indeed, Roxanne's taste for whipping lies in its ritualistic and theatrical elements rather than in the sensation it produces: she fantasizes about "each detail of the ritual. If only it didn't hurt so much."¹⁷¹ For Baudrillard, the reversibility of seduction produces "pure gratification," and so too does the reversibility of power enabled by sadomasochism's theatricality and artifice: for Stein, the exchange of energy produces "a transcendent level of intimacy and intensity," and for Juicy Lucy, it is the fluid flow of power that is the source of satisfaction.¹⁷² In Queen's story "The Leather Daddy and The Femme," it is the knowledge that her lover will "flip," that is, exchange dominance for submission, that produces "a hot pulse in [Miranda's] cunt"; referring to the reversibility of roles, Miranda states that "a fuck is almost always better for that kind of energy."¹⁷³

Sadomasochism's "true" violence: the destruction of the real

Pleasure, then, is derived from sadomasochism's games and challenges, artifice, theatricality, and, significantly, through the signs of power that declare themselves as such. It is specifically the signs of power that are underscored when the submissive in "The Surprise Party" states that she is attracted to the "the uniforms, the guns, [and] the

¹⁶⁶ Pat Califia, "The Vampire," in *Macho Sluts* (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 1988), 249.

¹⁶⁷ Califia, "Calyx," 60; Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 150.

¹⁶⁸ Van Dyke, "Community," 117.

¹⁶⁹ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 132; Califia, *Feminism*, 232.

¹⁷⁰ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 32; Califia, "Calyx," 163.

¹⁷¹ Califia, "Calyx," 142.

¹⁷² Baudrillard, "Forget Foucault," 45; Stein, "Progression," 51; Juicy Lucy, "Tie Me Up," 31.

¹⁷³ Carol A. Queen, "The Leather Daddy and the Femme," in *Doing it for Daddy: Short and Sexy Fiction About a Very Forbidden Fantasy*, ed. Pat Califia and Robin Sweeney (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1994), 158, 157.

muscles” of policemen.¹⁷⁴ Similarly, it is purely the verbal signifiers of power that are said to stimulate Roxanne when one dominant declares “on your back and spread your legs [...] that’s the seven words you like to hear the most, right? Gets you drippin’ in nothing flat.”¹⁷⁵ Sadomasochism in this cultural moment is clearly marked as a Baudrillardian perversion in having “a burning concern with signs rather than an exchange of desires.”¹⁷⁶ This focus on signs and their pleasures highlights the way in which, for pro-sadomasochists, the practice has no basis in “real” power dynamics, and therefore that power needs to be constructed, which is achieved through an excess of signification. Califia highlights the central role of signs in sadomasochism in defending the practice from feminist condemnation: “there are many different ways to express affection or sexual interest. Vanilla people send flowers, poetry, or candy, or they exchange rings. S/M people do all that, and may also lick boots, wear a locked collar, or build their loved one a rack in the basement [...] my sexual semiotics differ from the mainstream. So what?”¹⁷⁷ Califia strategically erases the hierarchy between practices posited as normal and abnormal by framing both vanilla and sadomasochistic practices as a semiotic performance, so that sadomasochism simply becomes a different mode of signification rather than an inherently perverse pathology. In doing so, Califia implies that sadomasochist practice is constituted through a “proliferation of only the *signs* of power,” as Baudrillard would state.¹⁷⁸ The importance of verbal signs in negotiating dominant and submissive roles is highlighted in “The Leather Daddy and the Femme,” in which Jack asks Miranda, “‘pretty bitch, you want it rough, you like it like that?’ ‘Yes!’ [Miranda] gasped, still riding the last waves of come, wanting more. ‘Then tell me. Ask for it. Beg me!’”¹⁷⁹ Miranda’s verbal participation is essential to the power dynamic she enjoys, not simply because it indicates her consent, but because in “begging” she constructs her own submission. The importance of appropriate verbal signification is also demonstrated in “Passion Play”: “‘What can I do for you?’ Meg asked. ‘What can you do for *who*?’ Carole said. ‘Pardon *me*,’ Meg said, embarrassed at her obvious mistake. She corrected herself, ‘What can I do for you, Mistress?’”¹⁸⁰ It is by addressing the other as “Mistress” or “Sir” that the speaker becomes slave to the master.

In addition to verbal signs, visual signs are also crucial to the construction of power in the sadomasochism scene: the visual aesthetics created through costumes, for example, construct the power positions held by the participants. In “Spoonful of Sugar,” a scene is initiated by the invitation “‘well, tell me what I should wear.’ This more than anything allows Teena to tell me who I am tonight [...] I pull the shiny black latex past my elbow, letting it snap tight, hugging the curve of my arm [...] I feel myself *become* a

¹⁷⁴ Pat Califia, “The Surprise Party,” in *Macho Sluts* (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 1988), 214.

¹⁷⁵ Califia, “Calyx,” 129.

¹⁷⁶ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 125.

¹⁷⁷ Califia, *Feminism*, 235. The term “vanilla” is frequently employed within BDSM subcultures to refer to that which is non-kinky, that is, not related to sadomasochism or BDSM practices, whether heterosexual or homosexual. The term can be used pejoratively or neutrally.

¹⁷⁸ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 48.

¹⁷⁹ Queen, “Leather Daddy,” 29.

¹⁸⁰ Martha Alexander, “Passion Play,” in *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, ed. Samois (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1987), 233.

mistress when I slide on leather gloves.”¹⁸¹ The narrator’s power position is entirely constructed through the visual signs of her costume; she is not a mistress who dons leather or latex gloves as an expression of her power position, but rather becomes a mistress, becomes powerful, precisely by donning leather or latex gloves. The attainment of power positions in somasochism, just like the embodiment of gender identity for Butler, is “always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed.”¹⁸² The visual signs of power exchange are also emphasized in “The Finishing School,” which describes the way in which Clarissa, a submissive, wears shoes that are linked together by a “fine silver chain” attached to the back of each heel. This chain constrains “the length of steps Clarissa could take and the positions she could arrange her limbs in when at rest,” but its constraint is purely symbolic as Clarissa must take care not to snap the chain that is “thin enough to break.”¹⁸³ As if serving as a metaphor for the nature of power in somasochism within this cultural moment, the bondage enabled by the chain requires the willingness of all participants to agree upon and maintain its function, to commit to it “a token fidelity.”¹⁸⁴ If Mistress J. R., in “Regarding Wanda B.,” loves “the way [her slave] twists and turns in her chains; how she screams when the whip comes down [...] her soft appeals and shrieking no’s, her offers to give me anything, to do anything, if only I’ll stop,” it is because this theatrical display actually constitutes the power dynamic that she takes pleasure in; perhaps Mistress J. R.’s submissive knows, like Baudrillard, that “it is appearances, and the mastery of appearances, that rule.”¹⁸⁵

These visual and verbal signs of power are so crucial to somasochism—and are emphasized in a way that suggests this importance—because there is no power that exists before or beyond them. The signs of power that provide the basis of pleasure in the somasochism scene, the visual cues and the exaggerated performative utterances, are not expressions of an inherent power structure but rather demonstrate that power is constituted through a “simulation of power” that has “power effects”; as Butler reiterates, “power is established in and through its effects.”¹⁸⁶ Baudrillard’s and Butler’s notions of “power effects” are anticipated by Nietzsche, who, in unfolding his theory of Becoming, claims that power is always constituted through its own appearance. Both dominant and submissive parties are complicit in this constitution as power is only created when a command is obeyed. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche argues that “there has only been exercise of will when the effect of the command—consequently obedience, and therefore action—was to be *expected*, the *appearance* has translated itself into sentiment, as if there were a *necessity of effect*.”¹⁸⁷ Power, as

¹⁸¹ Minx Kelly, “Spoonful of Sugar,” in *The Second Coming: A Leatherdyke Reader*, ed. Pat Califia and Robin Sweeney (Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 1996), 23–4.

¹⁸² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 34.

¹⁸³ Pat Califia, “The Finishing School,” in *Macho Sluts* (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 1988), 64, 65.

¹⁸⁴ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 137.

¹⁸⁵ Mistress J. R., “Regarding Wanda B.,” in *The Second Coming: A Leatherdyke Reader*, eds. Pat Califia and Robin Sweeney (Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 1996), 45; Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 88.

¹⁸⁶ Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Baudrillard *Simulations*, 42; Butler *Bodies*, 231n.

¹⁸⁷ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Marion Faber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 15.

Nietzsche asserts, and as postmodern constructions of sadomasochism demonstrate, is not a preexisting thing that is seized upon or inherently held by certain individuals, even though it may appear so, but something that comes into being through its own appearance. However, in sadomasochism, there is no apparent “necessity of effect,” no claims of being natural, as is inherent to Butler’s analysis of power and performativity, as the performative nature of power is exhibited through the exaggeration of its signs. Power is *explicitly* constituted through theatrical verbal utterances, visual displays, and physical sensations and gestures created by both dominant and submissive participants; in sadomasochism, as in seduction, power “undergoes a metamorphosis into signs and is invented on the basis of signs,” and in doing so, clearly shows, like Magritte’s *Ceci n’est pas une pipe* in Foucault’s estimation, how “things” are produced by discourse.¹⁸⁸

In highlighting the way in which power within the sadomasochism scene is an aesthetic construction, sadomasochistic practice shows power—power in general, power in “society”—to be thus constructed. As McClintock states, in borrowing its “decor, props and costumery [...] from everyday cultures of power [...] S/M reveals that social order is unnatural, scripted and invented.”¹⁸⁹ The performance of sadomasochistic power thus dissolves the distinctions between the artificial and the real that were proposed precisely through the articulation of sadomasochism’s theatricality. Sadomasochism-as-theater reveals the theatricality that underscores social power structures, that, in this case, are obscured by claims of reality and being “natural.” In this respect, sadomasochism is paradoxically shown to be *not* theatre, play, or scene insofar as the traditional aesthetic deployment of these terms implies a distinction between representation and reality; sadomasochism thus functions as an anti-aesthetic performance of power. If the materiality of power, the notion of power as a substantive phenomenon, is produced “only when its status as contingently constituted through discourse is erased, concealed, covered over,” as Butler states, then sadomasochism serves to expose, to flamboyantly showcase, the contingency of this construction.¹⁹⁰ As in Foucault’s notion of similitude, sadomasochistic power is not a copy of a real model of social power, but shows that there is no model to begin with; sadomasochistic power and social power may be related through similarity but not resemblance, for the former shows that there is no “outside” of surface representation, “manipulat[ing] the *signs* of power in order to refuse their legitimacy as *nature*.”¹⁹¹ Power that seeks to be real, that is constructed as natural, irreversible, and immortal, the production of power through the law, is destabilized by power that displays itself as artificial, power that foregrounds its localized operation, the seduction of power through the rule.¹⁹² The sadomasochistic scene of seduction spells “*the end of power*; the end of the strategy of the real”; like the *trompe l’œil*, it shows, in typical

¹⁸⁸ Baudrillard, “Forget Foucault,” 59; Foucault, *Pipe*, 37.

¹⁸⁹ McClintock, “Imperial Leather,” 642.

¹⁹⁰ Butler, *Bodies*, 251n.

¹⁹¹ McClintock, “Maid to Order,” 91.

¹⁹² Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 48, 46.

poststructuralist fashion, that there is no “reality” behind appearances but that appearances constitute what is known as reality.¹⁹³

In its capacity to show how power—power *tout court*, not just sadomasochistic power—functions as power *play*, a theatrical assemblage of signs, we may ask: in light of Butler’s premise that the destabilization of notions of truth and nature form the foundation of feminist political subversion, does sadomasochism encumber power’s ability to appear natural and universal, foiling, as Baudrillard states, “all systems of power and meaning,” and the social inequalities they instate?¹⁹⁴ Many of the supporters of sadomasochism considered here would affirm that it is indeed a feminist practice, but in a very different way. In the same manner that Baudrillard argues that the duel and agonistic rule allows a freedom and equality forbidden in the law, so too do many of the writers in question, in differentiating “artificial” power in sadomasochism from “real” social power, constantly argue in the same vein as Stein, who claims that there is “a radical equality involved in the consensual exchange of power,” in the theatrical and entirely chosen scene of sadomasochism in which “we get to make conscious choices and participate willingly for whatever period of time we want to. We free ourselves from unconsciously participating in our own oppression on a daily basis.”¹⁹⁵

Rather than adjudicating between these two possibilities, both offering a case for a feminist reading of sadomasochism, I wish rather to point out what is revealed by their utter incompatibility: sadomasochism, it is suggested, may be a feminist practice by virtue of its absolute distinction from social power, or the unaesthetic real, and, on the other hand, it may be a feminist practice by virtue of its capacity to highlight the absolute dissolution of distinctions between aesthetic representation and the unaesthetic real, showing that all power is simply theater and performance. This incompatibility underlines postmodernism’s quandary: postmodern theory suggests that the aesthetic constitutes what is known as reality, necessitating the collapse of divisions between the artificial and the authentic. Yet if sadomasochistic power is shown to be constituted in the same way as social power, that which is sadomasochism and that which is simply “social” become perversely open to a conflation pointing back to the dubious radical feminist claim that “the whole culture is S/M,” that “sadomasochism is [...] an irreducible condition of society,” albeit through a different logic than that driving the initial enunciation of these arguments.¹⁹⁶ Furthermore, if the aesthetic is everywhere and everything, it is impossible to distinguish a practice as art; the aesthetic requires its unaesthetic others, as Baudrillard has, perhaps unwittingly, shown (“art is everywhere” and so “art is dead,” Baudrillard states, but rescues art by repeatedly asserting aesthetic/unaesthetic boundaries).¹⁹⁷ Distinctions between the aesthetic and the unaesthetic, which risk being reductive or simplistic, are required for sadomasochism to be framed as a practice that is not related to the power dynamics involved in

¹⁹³ Baudrillard, “Forget Foucault,” 133; Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 60.

¹⁹⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxiv; Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 21.

¹⁹⁵ Stein, “Progress,” 53; Van Dyke, “Community,” 121.

¹⁹⁶ Griffin quoted in Rubin, “Leather Menace,” 210; Linden *et al.*, “Introduction,” 4.

¹⁹⁷ Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 151.

patriarchy and heterosexuality, a practice that has aesthetic value and offers pleasures that potentially anyone can enjoy through making a conscious decision to do so. That is, these distinctions are required for the production of the distinctive category of aesthetic sexuality. The dilemma of sadomasochism as aesthetic sexuality within postmodernity is that it dissolves the categories that its practitioners strenuously assert and that it fundamentally requires.

Conclusion: fashioning BDSM today

In illustrating the various forms in which aesthetic sexuality has existed since the eighteenth century, I have, in this book, detailed one particular way in which the *ars erotica*—one of the most enigmatic and overlooked concepts in studies of the history of sexuality—finds its expression within modern Western culture. Aesthetic sexuality is characterized by qualities that oppose those of essentialised sexuality, the primary object of deconstruction and analysis for Foucault and many other sexuality scholars. Essentialized sexuality, a product of the nineteenth-century *scientia sexualis*, is constructed as a natural, inborn, and permanent function of the body, subject to acquired or congenital psychological and physiological pathologies, a truth to be discovered and analyzed, and the root of involuntary sexual acts and desires performed by certain types of people. In contrast, aesthetic sexuality is not defined by any underlying cause but primarily by the meanings communicated through its aesthetic value, at the surface level of sexual pleasure, acts, and identifications. Constructed as a form of art, aesthetic sexuality serves as a deliberate and conscious form of self-creation and social communication and may be practiced by potentially anyone on this basis. Using the example of sadomasochism, or practices that would now be associated with this category, I have mapped a cultural history of aesthetic sexuality since the late eighteenth century, detailing its evolving aesthetic value, the different ways in which sexuality has been constructed as art.

This cultural history articulates a dialogue between the literary history of sadomasochism, a particular form of sexual subjectivity, and the history of aesthetic philosophy. In its eighteenth-century development in the work of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, Burke, and Kant, the aesthetic demands a universal mode of judgment that, despite being constructed as an involuntary and natural cognitive occurrence, requires cultivation and effort to achieve. Intimately linked with ethics, aesthetics provides a means of instating a model of instinctive and involuntary morality. The late nineteenth-century aestheticism of Pater might be framed as a reaction to the principles of eighteenth-century aesthetics: rather than adherence to a universal standard, it promotes a distinctly individualistic form of aesthetic appreciation that is experienced with the

corporeal sensuality and passion generally spurned by the philosophers of the previous century. While Pater's aesthetic philosophy, which acquires a subtly immoral and sadistic tone, is centered upon self-fashioning through social distinction, Nietzsche's aesthetics involve the destruction of individual subjectivity and the reconstruction of collective subjectivity through the aesthetic drives of Apollo and Dionysus. Nietzsche's exposition constitutes what is perhaps the most explicitly corporeal and sexualized—and indeed remarkably sadomasochistic—theory of art explored in this book. Postmodern aesthetics extend Nietzsche's attack on metaphysical truth by promoting the aesthetic, as a realm of artifice and signs, to the heart of reality; if postmodern aesthetics herald the death of art, it is because art is now deemed to be everywhere.

Through temporal proximity and patterns of influence, this history of aesthetic philosophy informs, or is reflected within, the various incarnations of sadomasochism-as-aesthetic sexuality mapped in this book, commencing with the eighteenth-century work of the Marquis de Sade. I have demonstrated how Sade's novels *Histoire de Juliette ou Les Prospérités du vice*, *Justine ou Les Malheurs de la vertu*, and *Les 120 journées de Sodome* articulate the principles of eighteenth-century aesthetics to construct libertine sexual acts as automated functions of the body available to potentially any libertine subject. Here, libertine sexuality is consciously and deliberately authored by Sade as an instinctive and involuntary aspect of the libertine's aesthetic judgment of crime in order to criticize the ideological imperatives of the aesthetic. In the late nineteenth-century decadent works *Le Jardin des supplices*, by Octave Mirbeau, and the poems "Dolores," "Anactoria," and "Laus Veneris" by Algernon Charles Swinburne, perverse decadent pleasure is constructed as a form of aesthetic pleasure derived through a hyperbolized and lyricized Paterian aesthetic appraisal of torture and pain. As the decadent pervert progresses from critic to artist, pleasure becomes an aesthetic production endowed with a fine and elite status, serving to criticize state-sanctioned brutality and situate decadent subjectivity outside of what is deemed vulgar bourgeois society. In the work of mid-twentieth-century French avant-garde writers—George Bataille's *L'Érotisme* and *Histoire de l'œil*, Pauline Réage's *Histoire d'O*, and Jean de Berg's *L'image*—constructions of violent sexuality, founded upon Nietzsche's sublime aesthetics, dissolve Apollonian individual subjectivity and refashion collective Dionysian subjectivity in its place, enacting Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics by throwing into question the possibility of absolute truth and subjective essence. In American political and pornographic writing from 1981 to the early twenty-first century, sadomasochism becomes a performance of power that accords with the principles of postmodern aesthetics, particularly those of Baudrillard, to both reify and dissolve distinctions between real and performed power, the aesthetic and the unaesthetic. This contradiction plays out the quandary that postmodernism poses for aesthetic sexuality: if distinctions between the aesthetic and the unaesthetic are dissolved, the very existence of this category of sexuality is threatened.

Each of these significant moments in the cultural history of sadomasochism foregrounds different elements of aesthetic sexuality. The qualities of choice and deliberation are particularly pertinent in the nineteenth-century decadent texts and in post-1980s American pornographic and political writing, cultural moments that also prize the quality of artifice. The social communication achieved by aesthetic sexuality

often takes the form of political critique, which is displayed most prominently in the works of Sade and in nineteenth-century decadent literature. The capacity of aesthetic sexuality for self-creation plays out in the latter moment as a means of self-fashioning through social distinction, in mid twentieth-century French avant-garde literature through sublime self-dissolution and reconstruction, and in American political and pornographic writing through the choice to style one's sexuality and identity through performance and ritual. The notion that sadomasochism may be performed by potentially anyone is present in each cultural moment but is perhaps most developed within the earliest and latest periods I have addressed. By examining different constructions of aesthetic sadomasochism in key cultural moments from the eighteenth to the twenty-first centuries, and the themes maintained through them, I have demonstrated how aesthetic sexuality, and thus also a form of the *ars erotica*, have existed as multifaceted and sustained phenomena in modern Western culture.

Fetish fashion: aesthetic/erotic

The conclusion of this book considers what the model of aesthetic sexuality developed in the preceding chapters reveals about the most conspicuous articulations of BDSM in popular culture today, that is, in mainstream and subcultural fashion. It is well observed that fetish fashion—the label given to the specific sartorial style strongly associated with sadomasochism and BDSM subcultures—enjoys a fluctuating mainstream popularity and often influences other style subcultures.¹ Fetish fashion is also known for its tendency to “bubble-up” into *haute couture* design, which is then “knocked off” by mass-market clothing manufacturers,” much to the disgruntlement of “actual” fetishists.² Cultural critics and subcultural members are united in regretting the phenomenon to which various subcultures fall prey when their “frenzied ecstasies [...] become an official aesthetic of consumer society, a monotheme of mass as well as adversarial culture.”³ Hebdige's lament about the mainstreaming of punk, the way in which “the subculture's subversive power” is diffused as its style becomes marketable and familiar, is echoed in the words of a writer known simply as Walter, columnist for the London-based, internationally-distributed fetish and BDSM magazine *Skin Two*, the most popular and widely-sold magazine of its genre.⁴ Walter notes that “the [kink]

¹ David Kunzle, *Fashion and Fetishism: A Social History of the Corset, Tight-Lacing, and Other Forms of Body-Sculpture in the West* (Totowa: Rowman & Littlefield, 1982); Valerie Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex and Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Ted Polhemus, *Street Style: From Sidewalk to Catwalk* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994).

² Steele, *Fetish*, 55, 166.

³ Thomas Frank, “Why Johnny Can't Dissent,” in *Cultural Resistance Reader*, ed. Stephen Duncombe (London: Verso, 2002), 318.

⁴ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture, the Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979), 95, 93. *Skin Two* sells approximately 20,000 magazines per year, with an annual readership of 50,000 people, predominantly in North America and Europe. Tim Woodward, email to the author, 4 October, 2012. Walter takes his column title and name from the late-nineteenth-century volume of erotica entitled *My Secret Life* and also borrows the pseudonym of the author, generally thought to be Henry Spencer Ashbee.

scene got commercialised [...] fashion and advertising, McQueen, Galliano, Jean Paul Gaultier and even Saatchi and Pirelli have all cut cloth and lined pockets from the body politick of the 'real' hardcore."⁵ Similarly, former *Skin Two* editor Tony Mitchell writes with a hint of regret about "images of pervery finding their way into mainstream culture."⁶ Implicit in these comments is the notion that subcultural practice embodies the qualities of authenticity, originality, and subversiveness, which are ostensibly opposed to—and undermined by—mainstream commodity culture. What Thornton observed in 1995, then, is still very much current: "the problem for *underground subcultures* is a popularization by a gushing *up* to the mainstream rather than, say, the artworld's dread of 'trickle down'."⁷

Those documenting the mainstreaming of fetish fashion distinguish between "actual" fetishists and those who adopt the style solely for its aesthetic signification. One of the key arteries of the rise of fetish fashion was, during the 1970s, Malcolm McLaren's fashion boutique, "SEX," stocked with Vivienne Westwood's designs.⁸ The boutique, Steele suggests, serviced a clientele consisting half of actual fetishists and "half [of] young people who wanted clothes that were 'about breaking taboos,'" that is, members of the burgeoning punk subculture.⁹ Fetish clothing allowed these punks to articulate deviance from mainstream values and a "delight in artifice and deliberate perversity."¹⁰ In the 1980s, fetish style was integrated into the more elegant and differently coded goth style for similar purposes.¹¹ Punk and goth subcultures spawned the "perv" fashion tribe, whose members, Steele writes, "were not 'real' fetishists, although they dressed in fetish materials [...] but] a contingent of pop musicians, alternative fashion designers [...] and trend-setting club kids."¹² (Walter, on the other hand, uses the term "perv" to refer to "the tribe whose name is derived from its collective sexual preferences," so whether this label applies to "real" fetishists or those defined against them remains a contested point.¹³) Polhemus notes that the opening of the *Skin Two* nightclub in the early 1980s signified "the first attempt to bring together 'real fetishists' [...] and the growing 'pervy' contingent within pop music and alternative clothing designs."¹⁴ The now flourishing schedule of balls and parties organized by *Skin Two* continues to unite these two groups, according to *Skin Two* editor and CEO of the *Skin Two* company Tim Woodward, who notes without disparagement that their events are patronized by both "committed sexual deviants

⁵ Walter, "My Secret Life," *Skin Two* 51, 2005, 45.

⁶ Tony Mitchell, "Nifty Fifty!" *Skin Two* 50, 2004, 55. Of course, these views do not represent a consensus: mainstream representations of BDSM are bemoaned by some but celebrated by others, depending on context.

⁷ Sarah Thornton, "The Social Logic of Subcultural Capital," in *Subcultures: Cultural Histories and Social Practice*, ed. Ken Gelder (London: Routledge, 2007), 191.

⁸ Steele, *Fetish*; Polhemus, *Street Style*.

⁹ Steele, *Fetish*, 37.

¹⁰ Hebdige, *Subculture*, 108; Polhemus, *Street Style*, 15.

¹¹ Polhemus, *Street Style*, 104.

¹² Steele, *Fetish*, 55.

¹³ Water, "My Secret Life," 51, 45.

¹⁴ Polhemus, *Street Style*, 104.

and casual nightlife/fashion tourists.”¹⁵ Woodward and Polhemus forge a sharp distinction between those who use fetish fashion as a mode of spectacular self-display and “real fetishists,” those with erotic investments in the clothing.¹⁶ Entwistle does likewise: “fashions may ‘play’ with the idea of fetishism but this playfulness is some distance from the actual experience of fetishism [...] Fetishism ‘proper’ involves much more than simply adopting a fetishistic look; it is more about sexual feelings produced when wearing particular garments.”¹⁷ The question of why fetish fashion holds such an appeal to non-fetishists receives a widely-shared answer from (sub)cultural studies: “the growing popularity of fetish fashions within the wider culture is directly related to the charisma of deviance”; “once defined, deviance, especially sexual deviance, often enhances rather than undermines the appeal of something and this may explain, in part, why mainstream fashion frequently plunders ‘underground’ sexualities such as sadomasochism, fetishism, or gay and lesbian identities.”¹⁸ A clear distinction between fetish fashion’s service to sexual pleasure and its use for articulating transgressive subjectivity is also commonplace within subcultural discourse. This is exemplified by an article entitled “Gothic & Fetish: A Leathally [*sic*] Sexy Combination” from *Marquis*, a bilingual German fetish magazine.¹⁹ In addressing the popularity of fetish style within goth subcultures, this article asserts that “the real difference between a goth and a fetishist can be made out in the question of why they are wearing it. The first defines his or herself by appearance, wants to wear a crazy and beautiful costume to stand out in a crowd,” while for the fetishist, the clothing “is all about the exciting feeling on the skin.” BDSM practitioner, author, and subcultural celebrity Midori distinguishes herself as a “real” fetishist by writing in *Skin Two* about her erotic investment: “as an [...] out fetishist, I wear what turns me on [...] it really irks me when I hear some leatherfolk make disparaging comments about those of us who enjoy fetish dress events as being ‘stand and model club kids.’”²⁰

It is not my aim to dispute the distinction made by both cultural critics and subcultural participants between the “actual” fetishist and what might be termed the “fetish fashionista” or the “fetish tourist.” I do, however, take issue with the way in which this division is structured through a bifurcation of erotic and aesthetic categories. In these discussions, “real fetishism” is defined by the sexual pleasure the garments’ tactile sensations produce for their wearers while fetish “tourism” centers upon the visual spectacle facilitated by the clothes: a matter of sensation versus “the look,” the tactile versus the scopic. Showing how contemporary clothing fetishism practices constitute a form of aesthetic sexuality—a means of self-creation and social communication

¹⁵ Tim Woodward, email to the author, 4 October, 2012.

¹⁶ Polhemus, *Street Style*, 103.

¹⁷ Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 193.

¹⁸ Steele, *Fetish*, 193; Entwistle, *Fashioned Body*, 185–6.

¹⁹ Sandra Würdig, “Gothic & Fetish: A Leathally [*sic*] Sexy Combination,” *Marquis* 42, 2007, 25; *Marquis* distributes approximately 10,000 copies per issue, primarily across Europe. Peter Czernich, editor of *Marquis*, email to author, 25 October, 2012.

²⁰ Zille Defeu, “Meet: Midori,” *Skin Two* 58, 2007, 43.

defined by artifice, choice, malleability, and specific aesthetic values—necessitates a dismantling of these oppositions. By demonstrating how the aesthetic and the scopic are also vital to the eroticism of the “real” fetishist, I also highlight the particular role played by the notion of perversion in the constitution of this particular aesthetic and sexual identity.

In this brief consideration of contemporary clothing fetishism, I focus on cultures discursively constructed in *Skin Two* and *Marquis* magazines, particularly through their depiction of public fetish balls and parties. This discussion does not concern any type of clothing item that may be fetishized, but specifically the clothing style popular within contemporary BDSM subcultures, typically referred to as “fetish fashion” or “fetish wear.” In addressing the sexuality of fetishism, I use the term “erotic” for the encompassing scope of this term: “eroticism” evokes the inexhaustible ways in which sexual pleasure may be attached to objects and practices, whether or not this involves orgasm or sex. In this approach, I aim to counter the common use of reductive positivist models of fetishism, such as Gebhard’s 1969 framework, which proposes four specific categorizations based upon levels of sexual arousal.²¹ Woodward suggests that while fetishism may be an everyday phenomenon, evinced, for example, in the quotidian valuation of “sexy clothing and shoes,” this does not indicate a “‘fetishist’ in an overtly sexual way—the way that a *Skin Two* reader will be [...] the overtly sexual fetishist is different in that they would identify as fetishist, buy fetish magazines, go to fetish clubs, etc.”²² Here, Woodward highlights several important features of contemporary fetish cultures crucial to my discussion: that these cultures are centered upon a sense of identification, an active adoption of the term “fetish,” and a significant use of subcultural commodities.

Commodification and aestheticization

With the exception of a handful of historical genealogies of fetish clothes and objects, contemporary scholarship primarily engages fetishism as a psychoanalytic concept, Freud’s and Lacan’s interpretations being the most widely used. Yet practices of clothing fetishism, situated within heavily commercialized BDSM subcultures, demand not only a psychoanalytic diagnosis but an analysis that elucidates the affinity these practices share with the aesthetic logic of contemporary commodity culture. Consumption, Baudrillard observes, is a “system of ideological values,” an “order of signification, like language.”²³ Consumption never offers purely solitary pleasure, enjoyment “for oneself,” because “consuming is something one never does alone [...] one enters, rather, into a generalized system of exchange and production of coded

²¹ Gebhard, “Fetishism and Sadoomasochism,” 71–80.

²² Tim Woodward, email to the author, 4 October, 2012.

²³ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Sage, 2005), 78, 79.

values.”²⁴ For Baudrillard, the semiotic function of consumption demands a reconceptualization of Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism, which details how value comes to reside entirely within the exchange value of the commodity, obscuring the labor invested in its production. The form of commodity fetishism that dominates contemporary culture, Baudrillard argues, is “not a fetishism of the signified, a fetishism of substances and values” but “a *fetishism of the signifier* [...] it is not the passion (whether of objects or subjects) for substances that speaks in fetishism, it is the *passion for the code*.”²⁵ In distinguishing his theory of commodity fetishism from that of Marx, Baudrillard also renders his notion useful for an analysis of fetish clothing practices. Because the fetish object signifies through “a totally arbitrary code of differences”—which is, for the most part, obscured by an ideology of natural signification—artifice is posited by Baudrillard as a central characteristic of commodity fetishism, a quality foregrounded in particular fetish objects that serve as adornment: “tattoos, stretched lips, the bound feet of Chinese women, eyeshadow, rouge, hair removal, mascara, or bracelets, collars, objects, jewelry, accessories,” as “a kind of anti-nature incarnate,” transform “the body into a perfect object.”²⁶ Like Baudrillard, Haug frames sign value in terms of commodity aesthetics, stipulating the way in which these aesthetics are defined through differentiation, an “implicit negation of the qualities of other commodities.”²⁷ It is through aesthetic or sign value that commodities enable the pursuit of social status.²⁸ Bourdieu elaborates the way in which cultural consumption reproduces and legitimates class-based social difference through systems of taste, which he defines as “the propensity and capacity to appreciate (materially or symbolically) a given class of classified, classifying objects or practices”; exercising taste that accords with one’s class position, while implicitly negating other tastes, can serve as a source of cultural capital.²⁹

As subcultural studies have demonstrated, the assertion of status through commodity consumption is a theme particularly pertinent to subcultural groups. As Hebdige notes in his classic study of mod, punk, and Rastafarian groups, subcultures are “concerned first and foremost with consumption,” despite a common aspiration towards a uniqueness that transcends commercialism.³⁰ Hebdige also notes the way in which meaning is created through differentiation: the goal underlying “the style of all spectacular subcultures” is “the communication of a significant *difference* [...] and the parallel communication of a group *identity*.”³¹ The overarching distinction that Hebdige

²⁴ Jean Baudrillard, “For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign,” in *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 68.

²⁵ Baudrillard, “Political Economy,” 92.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁷ Wolfgang Fritz Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 1986), 98.

²⁸ Baudrillard, *Consumer Society*, 90.

²⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 56, 173.

³⁰ Hebdige, *Subculture*, 94–5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

posits between subculture and mainstream is, as Thornton points out, better conceived as an ideology generated within subcultures rather than as an objective fact, hinging upon binary distinctions such as alternative and mainstream, hip and straight, minority and majority, rebellious and conformist. Hipness, and its opposition to “straightness”—the distance articulated from the perceived mainstream—is conceived as “a form of *subcultural capital* [...] which] confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder.”³²

Practices of consumption, and the use of commodity aesthetics to articulate social status, are fundamental to the concept of lifestyle: in contemporary theory, consumption becomes an overarching framework for “the assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance and bodily dispositions,” the “cluster of habits and orientations [...] and] specific milieux of action” that constitute lifestyle.³³ For every lifestyle option embraced, others are rejected; each lifestyle is defined against other possible options.³⁴ While identity within industrial society was largely anchored in economic status and workplace roles, in contemporary culture, it is fashioned primarily through the social distinctions articulated through lifestyle.³⁵ The “project of the self,” then, is centered on the patterns of consumption that lifestyle is built upon.³⁶ One’s “stylization of life,” based as it is upon imagery and display—a “carnavalesque display” for some—is conceived as an aesthetic project.³⁷ The construction of identity through commodity aesthetics dissolves the division between art and life in contemporary society, demonstrating in its “aestheticization of reality,” as Featherstone puts it, that the core principle of nineteenth-century aestheticism—that life should be treated as art—proves to be ideally suited to twenty-first century commodity culture.³⁸

While Bourdieu discusses lifestyle as a system of taste that reproduces and reifies social class distinctions, others suggest that lifestyle can no longer be conceived as a fixed or coherent class-based set of dispositions or practices but should be understood as a series of deliberate and ephemeral explorations of experiences and “surface aesthetic effects.”³⁹ Lifestyles cannot be accepted “as ‘natural’ or ‘authentic’ [...] life styles are artificial creations or adoptions. The bearer himself is aware of the fact that the style can be donned and discarded at will.”⁴⁰ Since “artificially framed

³² Thornton, “Subcultural Capital,” 185–6.

³³ Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London: Sage, 1991), 86; Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 82–3.

³⁴ Giddens, *Modernity*, 83.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 198.

³⁷ Featherstone, *Consumer Culture*, 86; David Chaney, *Lifestyles* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 22; Lauren Langman, “Neon Cages: Shopping for Subjectivity,” in *Lifestyle Shopping: The Subject of Consumption*, ed. Rob Shields (London: Routledge, 1992), 68.

³⁸ Featherstone, *Consumer Culture*, 65, 86.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴⁰ Joseph Bensman and Arthur J. Vidich, “Changes in the Life Styles of American Classes,” in *American Society: The Welfare State and Beyond* (South Hadley: Bergin & Garvey, 1987), 121.

styles of life” construct identities, these, too, are characterized by consciousness, deliberation, and artifice; in Western consumer culture, identity is said to be “a matter of choice, style, and behaviour rather than intrinsic moral or psychological qualities [...] a game that one plays [...] based upon] leisure [...] looks, images, and consumption.”⁴¹ The malleable and voluntary nature of identity is also suggested in the porousness of lifestyle communities that allow people to “join in and to leave at will.”⁴² Postmodern consumption-based subcultures have weak boundaries and a transient membership, their participants able to exchange styles at a whim since “there is no authenticity, no ideological commitment, merely a stylistic game to be played.”⁴³ For Bauman, the element of choice confirms the aesthetic quality of identity within postmodernity: he observes that “our identities [...] need to be *created*, just as *works of art* are created.”⁴⁴ Indeed, in contemporary culture, choice is compulsory: “we have no choice but to choose” our lifestyle and identity, and, accordingly, “life can’t *not be* a work of art.”⁴⁵

Spectacular self-fashioning

The sartorial aesthetics observed at a well known fetish nightclub exemplify mainstay trends within contemporary fetish fashion: “at London’s club Torture Garden, heavily tattooed and pierced patrons dressed in leather, latex and rubber, overtly celebrate fetishism [...] The ‘New Flesh’ is molded by corsetry, tattooed, and pierced in various places on the nose, ear, lip, eyebrow, cheek, nipple, tongue and genitals, marking the subject as existing outside of social norms and mainstream desires and identifying the body as a member of a loose-knit tribe or subculture.”⁴⁶ Other typical features of fetish style include heavy, theatrical makeup, brightly colored hair and outrageous wigs that match bizarre and extravagant outfits. Fetish style, as the fashion shoots and party snaps in *Skin Two* and *Marquis* magazines demonstrate, features strong aesthetic similarities to goth, punk, and cyberpunk styles, evidencing the intermingled histories of these sartorial traditions. Bizarre aesthetics have occupied an integral place in fetish cultures since the late nineteenth century, and, indeed, the term “bizarre” has historically been used in many fetish magazines and other subcultural publications as a means of defining fetishistic objects and practices.⁴⁷ This term is still current within contemporary discourse: for

⁴¹ Giddens, *Modernity*, 198; Douglas Kellner, “Popular Culture and the Construction of Postmodern Identities,” in *Modernity and Identity*, eds. Scott Lash and Jonathan Friedman (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 153.

⁴² Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 112.

⁴³ David Muggleton, *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 52, 47.

⁴⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *The Art of Life* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), 54.

⁴⁵ Giddens, *Modernity*, 81; Bauman, *Art of Life*, 53.

⁴⁶ Amanda Fernbach, *Fantasies of Fetishism: From Decadence to the Post-Human* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 4.

⁴⁷ Robert Bienvenu, “The Development of Sadoomasochism as a Cultural Style in the Twentieth-Century United States” (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1998).

example, a three-night series of fetish and BDSM parties in Hamburg, advertised in *Skin Two*, is hosted by “Boutique Bizarre,” while an advertisement for “Ripplesmooth” latex and rubber clothing promotes a business that specializes in “the restrictive and the bizarre.”⁴⁸ The bizarre sartorial style displayed in contemporary fetish club cultures is described by Fernbach as the “transgressive aesthetic,” a phrase that underscores the centrality of perceived social deviance to fetish style.⁴⁹ *Skin Two* columnist Walter highlights how this distinction between the deviant and the normal is articulated through fetish style when he describes it as “dark twisted beauty in a very ugly straight white world,” a notion that is echoed in the commentaries on fetish party fashion that constitute the bulk of the event reviews in *Skin Two* and *Marquis*.⁵⁰ A review of “The House of Flesh” party in *Skin Two*, for example, reports that guests, upon entering, removed their “inconspicuous everyday coats to reveal spectacular outfits beneath.”⁵¹ The spectacular is linked to the transgressive in a description of the “2,500 fabulously attired fetish freaks” who attended the 2005 Skin Two Ball and in accounts of the “weird, colourful, spectacular, stylish” ensembles that a *Marquis* reporter observes at a Torture Garden ball.⁵²



Figure 8.1 Latex teddy-bear outfit worn at the Montreal Fetish Weekend
Photograph by Tim Woodward⁵³

⁴⁸ “Boutique Bizarre,” *Skin Two* 50, 2004, 42; “Ripplesmooth,” *Skin Two* 50, 2005, 108.

⁴⁹ Fernbach, *Fantasies*, 9.

⁵⁰ Walter, “My Secret Life,” 51, 45.

⁵¹ “SKIN TWO’s House of Flesh,” *Skin Two* 50, 2004, 66–7.

⁵² Walter, “My Secret Life,” 54, 2005, 45; “Torture Garden,” *Marquis* 42, 2007, 118.

⁵³ Image published in *Skin Two* 57, 2007, 87.



Figure 8.2 Inflatable latex pig outfit worn at a fetish club
Photograph by Tim Woodward⁵⁴

One of the photographs provided in a review of the Montreal Fetish Weekend in *Skin Two* depicts a man wearing, in addition to a mischievous grin, a hot pink latex top with black polka dots, black latex shorts, and a hot pink latex hood that, with the exception of eye and mouth holes, covers his entire head and crowns him with large teddy-bear ears (see Figure 8.1). In a photograph from another nightclub, a man wears an oversized inflated pink latex pig suit that features a hood with ears and a snout, and numerous pig teats resembling human breasts (see Figure 8.2). Such photographs highlight the way in which outrageous and bizarre fetish aesthetics are employed for provocative display and the transgression of assumed aesthetic norms, a project that requires a spectatorial presence and undermines the notion that “fetishism is often a private and secret activity.”⁵⁵ That spectacularly bizarre aesthetics serve—like Thornton’s notion of “hipness”—as a source of subcultural capital is suggested by a *Skin Two* correspondent from the “Kink in the Caribbean” holiday resort, who reports that “the wilder you dressed, the more friends you made.”⁵⁶ Dressing

⁵⁴ Image published in *Skin Two* 56, 2006, 77.

⁵⁵ Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen, *Female Fetishism* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 220.

⁵⁶ James Johnston, “Perverts of the Caribbean,” *Skin Two* 54, 2005, 24.

wildly through bizarre aesthetics instates a desired distance between the subcultural subject and the mainstream other, a distance that may permit entry into the subculture's upper social echelons, referred to throughout *Skin Two* as the "Perverati." Walter's phrase "ugly straight white" alludes, of course, to vanilla sexuality, suggesting that aesthetic transgression serves as a visual trope for sexual transgression, a self-reflexive commentary on the practice of fetishism in which this style is implicated. Bizarre fetish aesthetics define perverse kinky sexuality against vanilla sexuality, where the latter is often, although by no means consistently, "positioned as conformist, uninteresting, unadventurous and unerotic [... within] a celebration of perversity, of difference."⁵⁷

Contemporary fetishism, Fernbach suggests, repeats "the fantasies of the decadent *fin-de-siècle*," which involves "identifying with non-normative embodiments."⁵⁸ This identification is articulated in contemporary fetish cultures through tastes for the aesthetic qualities so admired by the sadomasochistic subjects in the work of Swinburne and Mirbeau, although this "addition of strangeness to beauty," as Pater would term it, is embodied not in displays of torture or the artistic creation of wounds but in sartorial style.⁵⁹ The perverse distinction from the mainstream that the fetishist achieves through this style is galvanized by the artifice that characterizes the colors used in hair, clothes, and makeup, and also in the plastic-like "second skin" of latex and rubber, which literalize the artificiality that Baudrillard notes is central to fetishism. What Fernbach terms the "fetishistic celebration of artifice and surface" facilitates the "transgression of sartorial and behavioural codes" that Hebdige observes is so crucial to the punk subculture.⁶⁰ The bizarre and artificial styles and colors displayed in the sartorial ensembles sported at nightclubs such as Torture Garden mimic the "formes bizarres" and artificial aesthetics of the murderous flowers in Mirbeau's *Le Jardin des supplices*: "cloisonné [...] depuis le vert paon jusqu'au bleu d'acier, le rose tendre jusqu'au pourpre barbare" might be used to describe the appearance of wigs, makeup, and latex in the contemporary fetish scene.⁶¹ Just as the strange surfaces of Mirbeau's flowers utilize the ideological superiority of artificiality to elevate the monstrous admiring subject above the bourgeoisie, so, too, does the artifice of fetish aesthetics elevate the fetish clubber, the glamorous deviant, above the vanilla mainstream. This form of perversion is constructed as superior to the norm from which it deviates, constituting a form of subcultural capital as well as a mode of elitist social distinction and self-fashioning.

The primary question posed for cultural critics by the mainstreaming of kink has been whether or not this phenomenon fosters social acceptance or tolerance of BDSM

⁵⁷ Gary W. Taylor and Jane M. Ussher, "Making Sense of S&M: A Discourse Analytic Account," *Sexualities* 4, no. 3 (2001): 303.

⁵⁸ Fernbach, *Fantasies*, 7, 42.

⁵⁹ Pater, *Appreciations*, 258.

⁶⁰ Fernbach, *Fantasies*, 42; Hebdige, *Subculture*, 91.

⁶¹ Mirbeau, *Jardin*, 194, 195; "bizarre shapes"; "cloisonné enamel [...] from peacock green to steel blue, from pale pink to barbarous crimson." Incidentally, the Torture Garden nightclub takes its name from the English translation of the title of Mirbeau's novel.

sexualities: do such representations “further the cause of sexual freedom” and foster “sexual diversity,” or do they reinforce an undesirable marginalized, pathologized, or perverse status?⁶² Nearly every critic who has considered this question argues that it results in the latter, even when such representations are purportedly “positive,” echoing the wide-ranging critique of “positive images” of gay and lesbian subjects in mainstream media.⁶³ However, studies that examine whether and by what means representations continue to associate BDSM with perversion overlook the way in which this category is employed affirmatively within the subculture, and how it is not only mainstream but also subcultural representations that reinforce divisions between normal and abnormal. If fetishism has “the capacity to subvert dominant discourses about sexuality, and the social order,” it is not simply because it is considered a marginal form of sexuality, as Gamman and Makinen suggest—being subversive does not necessary follow from being considered marginal—but because this marginality, this perversion, is idealized within the subculture as *superior* to the mainstream, to “normal.”⁶⁴ Yet this appropriation of perversion as a form of glamorous transgression elevated above the mainstream is limited in its subversive potential, relying on stable aesthetic, moral, and sexual norms as points of transgression; “vanilla” sexuality is disparaged but is absolutely pivotal to the self-definition of the self-styled deviant. Furthermore, the idealization of perversion is valid only within this subculture, existing within a specific value system; indeed, the utter incongruity that this value system displays with that of the posited “mainstream” is an essential part of the fabric used to distinguish this subculture from the vanilla world.

Erotic semiotics

Contrary to the notion suggested within both academic and subcultural discourse, what distinguishes “real” fetishists from “stand and model club kids” is not an emphasis upon appearance. Appearance, style, and the carnivalesque aesthetic signification of deviance are as fundamental to fetish subcultures as they are to the style subcultures such as goth and punk that share their iconography. I suggest, furthermore, that within fetish subcultures, the aesthetic is strongly imbricated with the erotic. That is, the spectacularly bizarre aesthetics of fetish style, and the way in which they function for the purpose of social distinction, lie at the heart of fetishism’s erotic appeal.

⁶² Margot Weiss, “Mainstreaming Kink: The Politics of BDSM,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 50, no. 2–3 (2006): 205; Gamman and Makinen, *Fetishism*, 3.

⁶³ Weiss, “Mainstreaming Kink”; Fernbach, *Fantasies*, 194; Eleanor Wilkinson, “Perverting Visual Pleasure: Representing Sadomasochism,” *Sexualities* 12, no. 2 (2009): 181–98; Andrea Beckmann, “Deconstructing Myths: The Social Construction Of ‘Sadomasochism’ Versus ‘Subjugated Knowledges’ Of Practitioners of Consensual ‘SM,’” *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* 8, no. 2 (2001): 66–95; Gamman and Makinen, *Fetishism*, 4.

⁶⁴ Gamman and Makinen, *Fetishism*, 2.



Figure 8.3 Kumi models a black rubber ensemble
Photograph by Peter W. Czernich⁶⁵

The softcore photoshoots in *Marquis* differ from conventional pornography in that they rarely display full nudity, and never explicit representations of sex. Although breasts are commonly shown, and genitals sometimes suggested, the models in *Marquis* are usually elaborately dressed in latex and rubber, and less commonly in leather and PVC. These outfits frequently display the bizarre aesthetics previously described. For example, one photoshoot in issue 40 features fetish model and subcultural celebrity Kumi Monster wearing a shiny black rubber catsuit and corset, a black tulle tutu, and black ballet boots (see Figure 8.3). Her breasts are exposed through two holes cut in her catsuit and her nipples are covered by two large black rubber imitations, which do not serve modesty but exaggerated indecency and the perverse aesthetic of artifice. The fake nipples are matched by large black rubber spikes adorning her shaved head, and she wears black lipstick and heavy black makeup that covers a large portion of her face around her eyes, recalling the cosmetic style of goth pop celebrity Marilyn Manson during the 1990s. The sense of the grotesque and the bizarre that characterizes this image, which is amplified by the aesthetic dissonance of the canary yellow background, serves a greater role than simply providing an interesting context for the display of rubber. Rather, the shiny black rubber contributes to the darkly bizarre aesthetics—and the aesthetic and sexual transgression these aesthetics represent—that function as a

⁶⁵ Image published in *Marquis* 40, 2007, 90.

significant source of the image's erotic appeal: the erotic hinges upon the semiotic. This particular aesthetic often achieves a more extreme expression in many of the photoshoots in *Marquis*, which appear to place a high erotic premium on artifice, and is also represented in the goth and cyberpunk subcultural signifiers sported by nearly every model displayed in the magazine. Indeed, it is likely that many of the images—particularly those in the “Gothic & Fetish: A Leathally [*sic*] Sexy Combination” feature article—have been sourced from photographers or agencies servicing subcultural fashion publications. While images of attractive women in subcultural-specific clothing might be eroticized in any context, this form of sartorial style serves *Marquis* with the expectation of fetishistic appeal, explicitly as an object of fetishistic pleasure; after all, *Marquis*, and *Skin Two* for that matter, are produced specifically for a market identifying as fetishist.⁶⁶

A similar erotic logic may be observed in the clothing worn at fetish parties, public spaces in which fetishistic sexuality is “spectacularized [...] evoked, provoked and orchestrated into images, signs, consumable models.”⁶⁷ Midori, it may be recalled, wears what turns her on, whatever it is that arouses her: “sometimes it’s a green latex bunny or a cyborg-alien-sex-fiend outfit.”⁶⁸ What is common to both costumes described is their bizarre visual aesthetics. The crucial part played by these aesthetics is evident in the photographs of the man posing in his inflated, breast-studded pig outfit, the man cavorting in the hot pink and black latex teddy-bear ensemble, and the rest of the spectacularly clad revelers. What these photos suggest is that bizarre visual aesthetics do not play a lesser role in defining fetish clothing than the tactility of the latex and rubber fabrics worn, but are fundamental, constituting the primary characteristics of the outfit, to which the surreal artifice of latex and rubber contributes. If fashion serves the project of “asserting identity, differentiating oneself from others and exhibiting a sense of superiority,” then clothing fetishism demonstrates an explicit eroticization of these processes, displaying in spectacular fashion how “sexual satisfaction [...] is] bound to the reflexive project of the self.”⁶⁹ The object of eroticization in these instances of clothing fetishism is the concept of perversion—the very status of the acts performed and pleasure taken—reframed through bizarre aesthetics as a signifier of glamorous transgression. The fetishism represented in *Marquis* and *Skin Two* is not simply fabric-specific, based upon latex and rubber, but may be deemed “a *fetishism of the signifier*” founded in “*passion for the code*.”⁷⁰ Like commodity consumption, clothing fetishism does not reflect “a need for a particular object”—or a particular sensation upon the skin—as much as a desire for “difference (*the desire for social meaning*).”⁷¹ In this respect, the particular form of clothing fetishism on stage

⁶⁶ Peter Czernich, email to the author, 5 October, 2012; Tim Woodward, email to the author, 4 October, 2012; see also Gamman and Makinen, *Fetishism*, 53.

⁶⁷ Baudrillard, *Consumer Society*, 191.

⁶⁸ Defeu, “Midori,” 58.

⁶⁹ Joanne Finkelstein, *After a Fashion* (Carlton South: Melbourne University Press, 1996), 96; Giddens *Modernity*, 164.

⁷⁰ Baudrillard, *Political Economy*, 92.

⁷¹ Baudrillard, *Consumer Society*, 77–8.

here points to a convergence of sexual fetishism and Baudrillard's brand of commodity fetishism through the eroticism invested in the aesthetic construction of subcultural identity—that of the glamorously deviant “perv”—and its distinction against the mainstream vanilla other, a convergence that illustrates an imbrication of, rather than an opposition between, the erotic and the aesthetic. The construction of the “perv” identity through bizarre fetish aesthetics lies at the heart of the erotic appeal of fetish clothing, so that aesthetic value—the semiotics of deviance—functions as sexual value.

Founded upon practices facilitated through the consciously-cultivated lifestyle of recreational nightclubbing and the consumption of spectacular fashion commodities, the perv identity challenges the notion of an innate, involuntary form of perversion with a highly conscious form of deviance, positioning sexual identity as “a reflexively organised endeavour.”⁷² Through fetishistic leisure and consumption practices, this identity is produced as “a matter of choice, style, and behaviour rather than intrinsic moral or psychological qualities,” albeit a choice constrained by financial means: latex and rubber clothes, especially the more elaborate costumes, do not come cheaply.⁷³ Wearing and taking pleasure in fetish clothing is a leisure activity that anchors a scene one may enter or leave at will; the practice of fetishism and the perverse identity constructed through it constitutes a form of subcultural style that one may “try on and cast off” on the basis of “the surface qualities of the spectacle.”⁷⁴ It is specifically a taste—an aesthetic preference—for fetish clothing that is defined through the negation of other, more mainstream tastes. “‘Normal sexuality’ is simply one type of life-style choice among others,” but perverse sexuality is framed within the BDSM subculture as a transgressive and thus superior choice.⁷⁵

The politics of style

The co-option of sexuality—particularly non-heterosexual sexualities—by commodity-based lifestyle structures is, for the main part, denounced by both scholarly and non-scholarly critics as a phenomenon antithetical to progressive or radical sexual politics. Many critics agree that the celebration or spectacularization of gay, lesbian, and queer sexualities within consumer culture obscures the inequalities their subjects endure in the legal, moral, and political spheres;⁷⁶ style is considered categorically apolitical, capable of erasing any real political significance from modes of representation.⁷⁷ The

⁷² Giddens, *Modernity*, 5.

⁷³ Kellner, “Identities,” 153.

⁷⁴ Muggleton, *Inside Subculture*, 48, 49.

⁷⁵ Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 179.

⁷⁶ David T. Evans, *Sexual Citizenship: The Material Construction of Sexualities* (London: Routledge, 1993); Eric O. Clarke, *Virtuous Vice: Homoeroticism and the Public Sphere* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); Rosemary Hennessy, “Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture,” *Cultural Critique* no. 29 (1994): 31–76; David M. Skover and Kellye Y. Testy, “Lesbigay Identity as Commodity,” *California Law Review* 90, no. 1 (2002): 223–55.

⁷⁷ Danae Clarke, “Commodity Lesbianism,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Barale, and David Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 196.

“choice” implicated in sexual lifestyle is considered to be trivializing, so that sexual identity is cast as “mere [...] sexual style that can be chosen—or not chosen—just as one chooses a particular mode of fashion for self-expression.”⁷⁸ Hennessy remarks that while commodity-based lifestyle constructions advance notions of malleable identities in an amoral market that values only individual rights, this “aestheticization of everyday life encourages the pursuit of new tastes and sensations as pleasures in themselves while concealing or backgrounding the labor that has gone into making them possible.”⁷⁹ She argues, furthermore, that these aestheticized sexual identities reinforce commodity fetishism—“postmodern sexualities participate in the logic of the commodity and help support neoliberalism’s mystifications”—limiting the capacity for “collective agency.”⁸⁰ These arguments are reasonable within their goal of assessing whether particular contemporary sexual formations are efficient at meeting specific political ends. Yet an over-determined focus on political efficacy obscures the broader significance of the commodity-based, chosen form of sexual lifestyle cited by these critics: that it demonstrates a contemporary manifestation of aesthetic sexuality, extending a history that can be traced to the late eighteenth century. Imbricating aesthetics and eroticism, clothing fetishism exemplifies a form of aesthetic sexuality through the way in which its aesthetic value—bizarre sartorial style—functions as a form of self-creation and social communication, and the way in which it is structured by notions of choice, malleability, and deliberation. Fetish sexuality and the identity accessed through it are “*created*, just as *works of art* are created.”⁸¹

If we were nonetheless to apply the seemingly obligatory test of political efficacy, we would ask: is there value to be found in the way in which contemporary consumer culture enables the figure of the fetishist to consciously construct its own “rebellious” perversion to contest the essentialised, psychopathologically perverse identity born of the *scientia sexualis*? The answer depends upon one’s evaluation of choice as a political tool: from the popular position that views the idea of choice to be an obstruction to the promotion of tolerance, as discussed in the introduction of this book, this particular incarnation of aesthetic sexuality is particularly damaging. Unlike the “postmodern” moment examined in the previous chapter, which saw the idea of choice instated on the premise that sadomasochism offers an equality, freedom, and fluidity absent in patriarchal society, the figure of the contemporary fetishist attaches its “choice” to its idealization of aesthetic, moral, and sexual transgression, its distinct anti-assimilationist aspirations. This figure opens itself not only to a critique of sexual expression based upon economic privilege, but potentially to condemnation of conservative groups that champion individual moral responsibility for “normal” sexual conduct. Even in envisaging modes of sexual deviance unattached from notions of psychopathology and sickness, this particular sexual construction offers no obvious solution to the problem of formulating a progressive politics for “marginal” sexualities. Nor should

⁷⁸ Clarke, “Lesbianism,” 197; see also Wilkinson “Bisexuality,” 294.

⁷⁹ Rosemary Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 58, 132.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 109, 106.

⁸¹ Bauman, *Art of Life*, 54

it: the question of politics—of being progressive, of being effective, promoting tolerance, and proving to be an affirmative and democratic phenomenon for particular sexual subjects—is extraneous to the significance of this sexual production. What is noteworthy about sadomasochism's aestheticized presence within clothing fetishism subcultures is that it represents, with apt extravagance, the most recent display of aesthetic sexuality. Of course, sadomasochism exemplifies only one form of aesthetic sexuality amongst what are no doubt multifarious varieties. Yet sadomasochism has served this study befittingly in demonstrating how the arts of existence and the *ars erotica*, concepts Foucault relegates to Eastern and ancient societies, do not simply place into relief the historical nature of "sexuality," but demand a reconceptualization of what sexuality may indeed be known to constitute.

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